

GEEK CHIC: NOT JUST FOR GUYS

Sorry, Boys, This Is Our Domain

By **STEPHANIE ROSENBLOOM**
Published: February 21, 2008

THE prototypical computer whiz of popular imagination — pasty, geeky, male — has failed to live up to his reputation.



Adam Strange

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Natasha Calzatti for The New York Times

LAUREN RENNER, 16 On Agirlsworld.com, blogged about her daily life and worked on the site's "My first prom" magic story that lets girls fill in blanks and make a tale about themselves.

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Research shows that among the youngest Internet users, the primary creators of Web content (blogs, graphics, photographs, Web sites) are not misfits resembling the Lone Gunmen of "The X Files." On the contrary, the cybergioneers of the moment are digitally effusive teenage girls.

"Most guys don't have patience for this kind of thing," said Nicole Dominguez, 13, of Miramar, Fla., whose hobbies include designing free icons, layouts and "glitters" (shimmering animations) for the Web and [MySpace](#) pages of other teenagers. "It's really hard."

Nicole posts her graphics, as well as her own HTML and CSS computer coding pointers (she is self-taught), on the pink and violet [Sodevious.net](#), a domain her mother bought for her in October.

"If you did a poll I think you'd find that boys rarely have sites," she said. "It's mostly girls."

Indeed, a study published in December by the Pew Internet & American Life Project found that among Web users ages 12 to 17, significantly more girls than boys blog (35 percent of girls compared with 20 percent of boys) and create or work on their own Web pages (32 percent of girls compared with 22 percent of boys).

Girls also eclipse boys when it comes to building or working on Web sites for other people and creating profiles on social networking sites (70 percent of girls 15 to 17 have one, versus 57 percent of boys 15 to 17). Video posting was the sole area in which boys outdid girls: boys are almost twice as likely as girls to post video files.

Explanations for the gender imbalance are nearly as wide-ranging as cybergirls themselves. The girls include bloggers who pontificate on timeless teenage matters such as "evil teachers" and being "grounded for life," to would-be Martha Stewarts — entrepreneurs whose online pursuits generate more money than a summer's worth of baby-sitting.

"I was the first teenage podcaster to receive a major sponsorship," said Martina Butler, 17, of San Francisco, who for three years has been recording an indie music show, Emo Girl Talk, from her basement. Her first corporate sponsorship, from Nature's Cure, an acne medication, was reported in 2005 in Brandweek, the marketing trade magazine.

Since then, more than half a dozen companies, including Go Daddy, the Internet domain and hosting provider, have paid to be mentioned in her podcasts, which are posted every Sunday on

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Natasha Calzatti for The New York Times

MARTINA BUTLER, 17 Stars in her own indie music podcast on Emogirltalk.com. Last Sunday's episode included music by Sequoyah Prep School and Death Cab for Cutie.

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Natasha Calzatti for The New York Times

SARADA CLEARY, 14 On Agirlsworld.com helped create an online game for National Spay Day and contributes craft ideas like how to decorate jeans.

undergraduate women choosing to major in computer science from 2000 to 2005, according to the National Center for Women & Information Technology.

Scholars who study computer science say there are several reasons for the dearth of women: introductory courses are often uninspiring; it is difficult to shake existing stereotypes about men excelling in the sciences; and there are few female role models. It is possible that the girls who produce glitters today will develop an interest in the rigorous science behind computing, but some scholars are reluctant to draw that conclusion.

"We can hope that this translates, but so far the gap has remained," said Jane Margolis, an author of "Unlocking the Clubhouse: Women in Computing" (MIT Press, 2002). While pleased that girls are mastering programs like Paint Shop Pro, Ms. Margolis emphasized the profound distinction between using existing software and a desire to invent new technology.

Teasing out why girls are prolific Web content creators usually leads to speculation and generalization. Although girls have outperformed boys in reading and writing for years, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, this does not automatically translate into a collective yen to blog or sign up for a MySpace page. Rather, some scholars argue, girls are the dominant online content creators because both sexes are influenced by cultural expectations.

"Girls are trained to make stories about themselves," said Pat Gill, the interim director for the Institute for Communications Research and an associate professor of gender and women's studies at the [University of Illinois](#) at Urbana-Champaign.

From a young age they learn that they are objects, Professor Gill said, so they learn how to describe themselves. Historically, girls and women have been expected to be social, communal and skilled in decorative arts.

"This would be called the feminization of the Internet," she said.

Boys, she added, are generally taught "to engage in ways that aren't confessional, that aren't emotional."

Research by the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at [Harvard](#) Law School, the result of focus groups and interviews with young people 13 to 22, suggests that girls' online practices tend to be about their desire to express themselves, particularly their originality.

"With young women it's much more about expressing yourself to others in the way that wearing certain clothes to school does," said John Palfrey, the executive director of the Berkman Center. "It ties into identity expression in the real world."

That desire is never so evident as when girls criticize online copycats who essentially steal their Web

[Emogirltalk.com](#).

"It's really only getting bigger for me," said Martina, an aspiring television and radio host who was tickled to learn about the Pew study.

"I'm not surprised because girls are very creative," she said, "sometimes more creative than men. We're spunky. And boys ... " Her voice trailed off to laughter.

The "girls rule" trend in content creation has been percolating for a few years — a Pew study published in 2005 also found that teenage girls were the primary content creators — but the gender gap for blogging, in particular, has widened.

As teenage bloggers nearly doubled from 2004 to 2006, almost all the growth was because of "the increased activity of girls," the Pew report said.

The findings have implications beyond blogging, according to Pew, because bloggers are "much more likely to engage in other content-creating activities than nonblogging teens."

But even though girls surpass boys as Web content creators, the imbalance among adults in the computer industry remains. Women hold about 27 percent of jobs in computer and mathematical occupations, according to the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#).

In American high schools, girls comprised fewer than 15 percent of students who took the AP computer science exam in 2006, and there was a 70 percent decline in the number of incoming

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page backgrounds and graphics by hotlinking (linking to someone else's image so it appears on one's own Web page). Aside from depleting bandwidth, it is the digital equivalent of arriving at a party wearing the same dress as another girl, Professor Palfrey said.

No wonder that girls post aggressive warnings on their sites such as "Do not jock, copy, steal, or redistribute any of my stuff!" or, more to the point: "hotlink and die."

While creating content enables girls to experiment with how they want to present themselves to the world, they are obviously interested in maintaining and forging relationships.

When Lauren Renner, 16, was in fifth grade, she and a friend, Sarada Cleary, now 14, both of Oceanside, Calif., began writing about their lives on Agirlsworld.com, an interactive e-zine with articles written for and by girls.

"Girls from everywhere would read it and would ask questions about what they should do with a problem," Lauren said. "I think girls like to help with other people's problems or questions, kind of, like, motherly, to everybody."

Today Lauren and Sarada are among more than 1,000 girls who regularly submit content to Agirlsworld. They make a few extra dollars writing online articles and dreaming up holiday-related activities, like Mother's Day breakfast recipes, which are posted on the site.

"At school there's just a certain type of people," Sarada said. "They're just local. Online you get to experience their culture through them."

THE one area where boys surpass girls in creating Web content is posting videos. This is not because girls are not proficient users of the technology, Professor Palfrey said. He suggested, rather, that videos are often less about personal expression and more about impressing others. It's an ideal way for members of a subculture — skateboarders, snowboarders — to demonstrate their athleticism, he said.

Zach Saltzman, 17, of Memphis, said content creation among his circle of male friends includes having a Facebook profile and posting videos of lacrosse games and original short films on YouTube.

"I actually really never thought about doing my own Web site," said Zach after returning from an SAT class.

He hasn't posted a video himself and doesn't have a blog because, as he put it, "it really never interested me and I don't have time to keep up with it."

Zach does, however, have a Facebook profile where he uploads digital photographs.

"It's really the only way I keep my pictures organized because I don't make photo albums and stuff like that," he said.

Asked whether the findings of the Pew study seemed accurate to him, he said: "That's what I see happening. The girls are much more into putting something up and getting responses."

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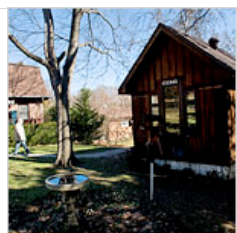
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