Morrison, Connie M. *Who Do They Think They Are?: Teenage Girls and Their Avatars in Spaces of Social Online Communication*. New York: Peter Lang, 2010.

Book Review

By Katie Elson Anderson

A May 2009 presentation from The Pew Research Center (PewInternet.org), which is a nonpartisan public opinion research organization, reports that over 65% of teens have an online profileand more girls (86%) aged 15-17 had online profiles than boys (69%) of the same age range (Pew Internet, 2009).   The Pew Research Center tracks trends, attitudes and the impact of the internet on American and world demographics and populations. Given more recent reports from this organization that show increased use of internet and social media by teens and young adults (Pew Internet, 2010) It is a safe assumption that these numbers have risen.   With so many teens, especially girls, creating and maintaining online profiles, Morrison's exploration of teenage girls and their avatars within social online communication is timely and relevant.   The book explores the notion of avatars and autobiography through both theoretical and practical approaches, bringing together the voices of current experts and the words of ten Canadian teenage (ages 13-17) girls. The author is inspired to explore teenage identity and avatar creation through a combination of informal personal observations and more formal professional interests. As the mother of a teenage daughter, she observes her own daughter creating avatars for social media use. As a researcher, Morrison's interests in youth culture, identity, and avatar creation are theoretical and pedagogical. The tone of the book varies from informal to formal, combining practical information on

the nature of her study and the participants along with thoroughly researched discussions and academic analysis. These changes in approach and tone from chapter to chapter can be slightly disruptive to the flow of the book, but it does show the author's familiarity and ease with the language used by teens in social online communication and the language of academia.

Morrison's intention in this book is to focus on identity and autobiography and she makes it very clear that she is discussing the creation of avatars within social communication sites, rather than avatars created in gaming environments. While the creation of avatars is still a fairly new research topic, the focus of most available research has been within gaming environments where avatars are used to create representations of characters that are not necessarily autobiographical. This is an important distinction for the reader to make, a distinction that also makes this monograph a unique contribution to current research on the subject of avatars.

Readers unfamiliar with the concept of avatars and social media will find that the author has taken this into consideration and provides sufficient details, context, and history. The details of the study are thoroughly explained in simple, practical language. The teenagers were recruited via the social networking site Facebook and were asked to create an avatar and then discuss their choices with the author and with each other. The teens were given several different websites on which to create their avatars, but they all chose the same one. The author's description of the website used for the avatar creation (weeworld.com) is so detailed, it is not even necessary for the reader to login to the site. Morrison has clearly spent much time on the site, exploring and analyzing the

options and even contacting the creators of the site to share what she observed during her own research regarding the choices or lack of choices in avatar creation.

Morrison acknowledges that much of what she observes in her study is limited to the choices and views of the ten girls along with the limitations of the one website. She does not claim their views and experiences represent those of all teenage girls. Rather, she uses this study as an opportunity to begin the discussion and exploration of self-identity and avatar creation. The book provides pictures of the selected avatars along with exact quotes from the teenagers regarding their selections and other relevant discussions that took place after creating the avatars. The inclusion of the teenagers' words enhances the analysis and allows the reader to become familiar with the girls in the study. Morrison gives the teenagers credit for asking new questions, providing observations, and opening up further avenues of exploration.

The girls in the study are from both rural and urban areas in Canada. Their ethnicity is only revealed through the black and white pictures of their avatars, which appear to be predominately white, but this is not entirely possible to discern. Only one girl complains that she was unable to match her skin tone. Many of the girls are athletic and identify themselves with their involvement in figure skating and other sports. The physical attributes of the girls in the study are not discussed in detail, but rather inferred by their avatar selection and their comments during the discussions between themselves and the author. The questions and observations from both the girls and the author involve those that occur in many discussions of visual representation and self-identity. These discussions include physical appearance such as skin color, body type, and clothing

and accessory selection. The girls struggle with being able to represent themselves with the limited options available and at times must make difficult choices as to how best to project their virtual images in similar ways to how they make choices on their physical appearance. The author proposes that an exercise in creating an avatar provides students with a learning experience for further discourse on these topics. Morrison provides suggestions on how to use avatar creation in the classroom to promote learning and open dialogue. Her argument for using avatar creation in education is backed by her extensive research review as well as her experience in the study.

The author states that the goal of the book is "to contribute to and participate in academic discourse in new literacies, critical media, youth pedagogy, girlhood identity and autobiography, particularly in its visual form" (Morrison, 2010: 7). Morrison achieves this goal by successfully combining academic discourse with the views and language of the teenagers in the study in order to appeal to a large and varied audience. In this book, important questions about visual representation and self-identity are aligned with the most current research and theories on the topic. By providing the reader with the actual pictures and comments of the teenagers, the author provides a way for the reader to connect with the girls as they are challenged to create their avatars. Adding to this is the availability of the actual language of the teenagers during the discussions. The reader is able to experience the questions and challenges as the girls attempt to express different sides of their identities. After experiencing the creation of the avatars with the teenagers the reader has a good understanding of the thoughtful processes behind identity and self representation. This practical experience, combined with the

detailed overview of current research helps Morrison achieve her goal and provides a strong contribution to academic discourse on the topic.

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