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"IT'S LIKE THEY'RE RIGHT THERE NEXT TO YOU": MAINTAINING GIRLS' CAMP
FRIENDSHIPS VIA MOBILE MEDIA

by

ELISE BRAGARD

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Women's and Gender Studies in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New

York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Women's
and Gender Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master
of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

"It's like They're Right There Next to You": Maintaining Girls' Camp Friendships via Mobile Media

by

Elise Bragard

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This thesis explores how a group of adolescent girls uses mobile and computer-mediated communication as a resource for social and emotional support from their friends. In the midst of widespread public panic about teenage social media use, this study finds nuanced and positive ways that technology is being used in girl culture. Within the context of a technology-free summer camp, adolescent girls form close relationships, which continue throughout the school year. The girls construct a virtual-symbolic camp space using mobile-emotive communication to stay connected with their friends. As a result, they recreate the intra- and inter-personal benefits they experienced at camp. This bounded space allows the girls to escape from negative or challenging aspects of school and home life. The mediated co-presence the girls experience with remote friends provides a resource for social and emotional support. By analyzing interviews and focus groups with the participants at summer camp and on Skype, this paper prioritizes the voices of adolescent girls and aims to understand their perceptions of the role of mobile and computer-mediated communication within their friendships.

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Introduction

Research into digital media and mobile technologies is an important subfield of girlhood studies. Technologies such as social media, video messaging, and other social apps play a prominent role in girls' relational and social lives. For example, I recently met three teenage girls from Kentucky at a women's rights forum in New York, and I told them about this research project. Surprisingly, these girls didn't use social media because their parents wouldn't allow it. When I asked them how they felt about not having social media, they told me that it was tough to have friends if you didn't have social media. Everything related to friends and social lives happened on social media, so they constantly felt out of the loop; isolated. This anecdote illustrates the importance of friendship in teenage girls' lives. The developmental and psychological significance of close relationships with other girls has been well documented. If social media or mobile communication is now a major factor in these relationships, it is crucial for researchers to understand the complexities of how girls use new media technology in their friendships, listening closely to the perceptions of girls themselves.

My research objective is to explore how girls who form close friendships in a technology-free environment use and perceive social media and mobile communication once they have access to their phones or computers again. Specifically, this research explores mobile-mediated supportive friend qualities and behaviors. A significant amount of research into girls' relationships and cultures focuses on relational aggression and other seemingly negative frameworks. The literature demonstrates that these behaviors have been amplified by the emergence of mobile communication and social media; cyber-bullying is now a research field, and studies suggest that girls are perceived as being victims of such behaviors more so than boys (Ang & Goh, 2010; P. K. Smith et al., 2008; Snell & Englander, 2010; Stomfay-Stitz & Wheeler, 2007; Wade & Beran, 2011). There

has also been widespread concern about the mental health outcomes of teenage social media use, as the rise in adolescent depression and anxiety seems to correlate with the increased prominence of new media technologies in youth cultures (Lin et al., 2016; O’Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011; Woods & Scott, 2016). While the current study takes these risk factors into consideration, a key objective is to explore aspects of social media and mobile communication that support the social and emotional well-being of girls.

Another aim of this study is to highlight the relevance of conducting research into children’s and teenagers’ emotional and social connections to summer camps, especially in relation to their use of technology. Over 7 million children/adolescents in the US attend summer camp each year (“Trends in Camper Enrollment and Staff Recruitment Reports,” 2015). Summer camps are one of the only spaces where millions of American children and teenagers voluntarily spend time without access to technology (“Cultivating Camp’s Tech-free Traditions in the Digital Age,” 2015). Not all camps are technology-free; there are some computer or technology camps which integrate digital media into their programming and some day-camps allow phones. However, the majority of traditional sleepaway camps have maintained the technology-free policies that were put in place when telephones and televisions were the only available forms of media. In this study, I explore how girls’ experiences at summer camp carry through into their school and home lives, which are constantly mediated by technology. I begin to conceptualize how the physical and literal camp space transforms into a virtual-symbolic camp space in the girls’ minds and through mobile and computer-mediated communication. I aim to understand how the virtual-symbolic camp space mediates their social lives and provides emotional resources. Perhaps noticeably, parents are absent in this study. This is partly because summer camp is a parent-free environment, and although parents are the ones paying for summer camp, the girls make a choice to go each summer.

Additionally, I make a conscious choice to concentrate on the girls’ analysis and reflection of their

use of mobile and computer-mediated communication, rather than bring in questions about parental control. My primary research question asks: how do girls who attend summer camp use mobile and computer-mediated communication throughout the school year to build upon their camp friendships and continue the social and emotional support they felt at camp?

Literature Review

Many of the influential qualitative studies about girls' friendships took place before the dominance of social media and mobile communication in teenage girls' lives (Bettie, 2003; L. M. Brown, 2003; Hey, 1997; Kenny, 2000). Although digital technology introduces new contexts, mediums, and influences, earlier studies provide contemporary researchers with important theoretical foundations for the meanings and processes of young, female friendship. This project builds on those studies by exploring how social media and mobile communication changes our understanding of girls' relationships.

Relational Aggression

Lyn Mikel Brown's theory of girls' relationships forms one of the conceptual frameworks for this study (2003). Brown theorizes that there are two seemingly contradictory truths about girls that are inextricably linked: first, that girls desperately need close friendships for their emotional and psychological well-being and that these friendships provide them the support to be confident and strong; second, that girls can be horrible to each other, engaging in bullying, policing, judging, exclusion, and fakeness. Brown insists that "we can't tell one story without the other... both exist because both reflect girls' desire for intimacy as well as their larger struggle for voice, power, safety, and legitimacy" (L. M. Brown, 2003, p. 5). The sexist societies girls have to live in causes them to hold up repressive and divisive behaviors that reinforce patriarchal ideas and practices, and it is these factors of their environment that make it so necessary for girls to seek and hold on to the safety of intimate friendships. Brown also highlights that the distinction made in the social sciences

between dyadic or triadic friendships, and broader peer relationships, is not valid when it comes to girls because of the inextricable link between smaller intimate friendships and the peer groups they fit within (or outside of).

The complexities of girls' friendships and relationships were under-researched until the 1990s because it was assumed that there was not an urgent problem to be studied. According to Brown (2003), social scientists assumed that other than some inconsequential squabbling, girls' friendships, in comparison to boys' friendships, were characterized by less bullying or aggression, and greater intimacy, kindness, loyalty, commitment, self-disclosure, and empathy. It was only after articles in the media reported a prevalence of meanness and non-physical aggression among girls that psychologists began to unearth a seemingly widespread phenomenon of *relational aggression* (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). This research was disseminated into public discourse, and it became a widely held idea that girls were naturally mean, and that it was a developmental phase all girls went through. Popular mainstream books such as *Odd Girl Out* (Simmons, 2003) and *Queen Bees and Wannabees* (Wiseman, 2002) took hold of public opinion. This idea was reinforced by media portrayals of girls and became a reality that girls (and women reflecting back on their school years) accepted (L. M. Brown, 2003).

The social and emotional support that girls seek in friendships and provide each other is well documented in the developmental psychological literature. During adolescence, both girls and boys begin to turn to their friends instead of their parents for social or emotional support. However girls make this transition earlier and quicker (Helsen, Vollebergh, & Meeus, 2000). Girls tend to demonstrate greater self-disclosure of their emotions to friends (and parents) than boys do (Papini, 1991). In response to the initial explosion of relational aggression research, and subsequently to Lyn Mikel Brown's socio-cultural reconceptualization of girl-fighting, researchers explored the coping strategies employed by girls who experienced relational aggression (Remillard & Lamb,

2005). In one mixed-methods study, “seeking social support [was] the most (and only) significant coping strategy in resolving conflict within a friendship in a way that [kept] the friendship close” (2005, p. 227). Social support was defined using a coping strategy measure and included “attempts to communicate with someone else about the situation... other people can be drawn on for emotional support, tangible support, and informational support” (2005, p. 224). The findings supported previous research which had demonstrated girls were more likely than boys to seek social support when coping with conflict. Social support was not necessarily sought from the friend involved in the conflict, and sometimes “the perpetrator of the relationally aggressive act did not even know there was a problem in the relationship” (2005, p. 227). This finding gives an insight into how a conflict between two girls can quickly become a situation involving a larger friendship, peer group or clique.

A sociological study of girls’ cliques in middle school found that the “construction of meanness [among girls]... was interrelated with the construction of popularity, the transformability of popularity into power, and the feelings of invulnerability and vulnerability that accompanied high levels of power” (Merten, 1997, p. 177). The teachers involved in the study believed it to be a developmental phase, and therefore a natural phenomenon that did not require serious attention or intervention. This laissez-faire attitude of teachers can result in girls having to perform the emotional labor of conflict resolution without the support of adults (Ringrose, 2008). Brown’s underlying assertion is that girls’ mean behaviors to each other are not a biological feature, nor a developmental stage; it is a result of gender socialization (2003). While Merten’s (1997) research helps to illustrate how social hierarchies are related to meanness in girls’ friendship groups, he does not fully consider all issues of sexism in society. He theorizes that it is the lack of acknowledgment of female social hierarchies (reinforced by cultural taboos about open female competition) that links popularity to meanness, and compares this to women in the workplace mediating their

individual success with solidarity among their female colleagues. Missing is the crucial aspect of competitive heterosexuality and girls' misogynistic behavior towards each other (L. M. Brown, 2003).

Ethnography and Girls' Friendships

Ethnographic studies of youth subcultures in the mid-20th century focused only on boys and young men until Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber published their theory of girls' bedroom culture (1976). Bedroom culture is the theory that for girls, the most important cultures/subcultures took place in the privacy of their bedrooms because they were marginalized or ignored in the youth subcultures of the streets. An important feature of bedroom culture was the exclusive and close friendship groups formed by girls, which allowed girls private spaces away from the judgment of boys and parents. A number of researchers have concluded that girls' online and mobile culture is an evolution of bedroom culture. For girls, the internet is like a virtual bedroom (Baker, 2011), their social media profiles acting like the walls of their room, with media resources pieced together to construct their identities and present themselves to those who access the space (Stern, 2000). The primary difference between virtual bedroom culture and the original theory lies in the issues of privacy and parental supervision. A girl can go online in her bedroom yet participate in online activities that are visible to her parents, or she can use her smartphone while sitting in the car with her mother but be immersed in a private, online community. Some platforms provide a completely private space similar to the bedroom, such as the anonymous communities of gURL.com, Tumblr, or fan fiction sites. Other platforms allow girls to keep their lives hidden from gatekeepers such as parents, teachers, and lawmakers, yet share it with friends and peers. This curated privacy creates a "subcultural space in which the identity process is enacted among teenage girls" (Thiel, 2005, p. 186). The ubiquity of mobile technology allows girls to carry this subcultural space with them, which disrupts spatial and temporal borders of when girls participate in this identity-making.

Valerie Hey conducted one of the first in-depth ethnographic field studies of girls' friendships in *The Company She Keeps* (1997). Hey found in her research that girls' friendships were often belittled and not viewed as important social dynamics. This argument is supported by the historical repression and reduction of female friendships because of their threat to the status quo of male hegemony and female subordination (Lake, 1988). Girls' close relationships and the conflicts within them were viewed as a temporary phase; ultimately their most important relationships would be with men. Working through frameworks for youth culture studies that were based on boys, Hey theorized that girls' friendships were *cultural resources* that were necessary for their success and survival in a patriarchal world. A major finding of Hey's study was the girls' use of secret notes to communicate approval and disapproval of friends' behaviors and to disseminate gossip. These "illegitimate knowledges and vernacular literacies" (1997, p. 138) are the precursors to the significance of text messaging, Snapchats, and fake/private Instagram accounts (commonly known as a 'finstagram' or 'finsta' accounts) within contemporary girls' friendships. In her ethnography of girls' friendships in a predominantly White, middle-class suburban school, Kenny found that the girls sought and maintained social power by accumulating knowledge of their peers and the "brokering of stories" (2000, p. 101). In the age of 'screenshotting,' where supposedly private text message or Snapchat conversations can be archived and shared easily within social networks, the risk of disclosing secrets and stories to friends is much greater.

Many scholars who have conducted ethnographic fieldwork with teenage girls have commented on the ethical dilemmas they faced as feminist researchers. This was especially true when the ethnographers were witness to exclusionary or mean behaviors. Morris-Roberts questions whether her non-intervening presence in these scenarios could have reinforced these behaviors (2001). Kenny acknowledges that in order to gain access to a high-status clique, she had to avoid public interaction with lower status girls (2000). Struggling with strict social hierarchies, Bettie

found that girls she had developed research relationships with were taken aback when they saw her talking to other groups of girls (2003). The racial and class identities of the researchers impacted the way they carried out their fieldwork. As a White woman, Hey found that although she attempted to talk to all girls at the school, she was able to form stronger relationships with White girls (1997). She suggests that the girls of color found it more difficult to trust and relate to her. It is possible though that Hey approached her fieldwork with this expectation, which subsequently impacted her research relationships. Bettie was concerned that as a White woman, she would struggle to develop strong relationships with the Mexican American girls, but in fact, experienced the complete opposite (2003). Kenny did not expect to have this issue because she was returning to the school community she had grown up in. Surprisingly for her, she realized that she “had to struggle to identify [her] own blind spots and self-imposed silences” (2000, p. 27) that came from growing up in a White, middle-class society that normalized privilege.

Hey (1997) warned against positioning girls’ friendships as superior because of an essentialized notion of girls as nurturers. She disagreed with earlier gender comparative studies of friendship that concluded girls were good at friendship and there were no serious problems. She maintained that girls’ friendships were not a utopia that resisted white, masculine hegemony: "It is after all the evaluation of other girls in terms of their 'performance of friendship' as a 'performance of femininity' which organized the moral and social economy of girls' relations" (1997, p. 135). This assertion is especially useful when thinking about how girls might perform friendship and femininity on social media, and how evaluations of such performances may be mediated by technology. Liking and commenting on friends’ Instagram photos, posting photos of close friends, maintaining Snapchat streaks, and responding promptly to text messages, are all new performances of friendship that may be subject to evaluation by one’s friend or peer group. The content and style of such actions may be evaluated by their adherence to norms of femininity: Does the photo

conform to normative beauty ideals? Does the comment employ language and emojis that imply femininity, such as an explicit positive reference to the friend's appearance, or a heart emoji?

Postfeminist Girlhoods

Performances of femininity and female identity by girls can be explained by postfeminist theory. Teenage girls in the Global North have supposedly grown up in a postfeminist society. The varied definitions and implications of postfeminism have been commented on by a number of feminist researchers (Butler, 2013; Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2004; Ringrose, 2012). Postfeminism has been positioned as the chronological period after second and third wave feminism: a time when feminist political activism was no longer necessary. It has been called a backlash against feminism in which girls and young women eschew feminist ideology. Postfeminism has also been used interchangeably with third wave feminism. McRobbie (2004) argues that postfeminist discourse entangles both feminist and anti-feminist ideas; feminism is “taken into account” (p. 255) but is largely assumed to be a thing of the past because gender equality has been achieved. Consequently, feminism is undone. Continuing this line of thought, Gill (2007) theorizes postfeminism as a neoliberal sensibility. The experience and choices of girls and young women are no longer related to structural inequality or political movements; rather there is an individualistic emphasis where all girls have agency and choice. In marketing and advertising, girls are positioned as consumers making decisions about their identities, their personal style, and the celebrities they idolize. The agency to reflectively ask “Who am I?” and make an individual decision is supposedly empowering. However, there also seems to be the constant pressure of self-improvement and the chasing of ideals. Is it really empowering when “Who am I?” and “Who can I be?” become “Who am I supposed to be?”

The internet provides a space where girls can explore who they are and whom they want to be. Most of the literature agrees that girls construct their identities within online cultures and that

for each girl there is rarely one fixed identity. Within predominantly female fan fiction communities, girls can choose to be themselves or construct alternative identities, and they can do both simultaneously on the same platform (Warburton, 2010). Similarly, on instant messaging (IM) platforms girls shifted between identities depending on whom they were talking to, each conversation window acting as a different experiment for whom the girl wanted to be (Thiel, 2005). Girls are able to explore queer identities online in ways they can't do in real life, because of the protection of anonymity and the ability to connect with more knowledgeable people, or people who have similar lived experiences (boyd, 2014; Stern, 2000; Stokes, 2010; Warburton, 2010). boyd argues that teenagers don't feel like they have to choose between representing their real selves or an alter ego, but instead construct their identities depending on the context of the platform they are using (2014). Sometimes this movement between identities is rooted in the context of the girls' cultures; diasporic Korean girls living in the US chose to construct identities on a Korean social network that connected them to Korean girlhood, whilst their identities on Facebook were very different (Bae, 2010).

Although many researchers credit girls themselves with a level of authority over their own identity construction, Banet-Weiser asserts that neoliberalism and its hegemonic view of femininity influences how girls represent themselves on YouTube (2011), and that on this platform “‘who am I?’ become[s] more about ‘how do I sell myself?’” (p. 285). There is an interesting connection between this kind of self-branding, and the way girls in Qatar had to curate their online profiles to reflect the expectations of their religion (Leage & Chalmers, 2010). Protecting the reputations of their families was of utmost importance, so they had to present themselves in a way that didn't necessarily reflect whom they felt they truly were. Both the girls on YouTube and the Qatari girls on Facebook self-present online in ways that adhere to cultural expectations, which is very different from the freedom of identity-making that seems to take place in other contexts.

Ringrose contextualizes contemporary Western girlhood within three postfeminist media discourses: the successful girl, the mean girl, and the sexy/sexualized girl (2012). The successful girl is compared to the failing boy in a binary which blames feminist educational policies for boys' apparent decline in achievement. The mean or violent girl has been highlighted by the media as a postfeminist crisis; if the ideal behavior of a girl is passive and repressed (a perspective that is also based on a White, middle-class ideal), then aggression among girls is a clear indicator that feminism has gone too far. The moral panic over the sexualization of girls is similarly "drawn around class-based moralizing lines and tends to invoke fears over contaminating forms of sexuality infringing upon constructions of appropriate girlhood sexual innocence and purity" (p. 49). Contemporary Western girlhood is also shaped by social media and online platforms. Teenage girls are not only focused on figuring out their identity within school and society, but they are also crafting a brand for themselves on sites such as Instagram and Youtube (Banet-Weiser, 2011). Banet-Weiser argues that success on online platforms (in the form of 'Likes,' comments, or views) relies on how well girls do the "neoliberal version of femininity" (p. 289). This implies a project of the self, wherein girls must constantly strive to look and be better. It is not a huge jump to hypothesize that just as girls evaluated each other's performances of femininity pre-social media in Hey's study, they do so now that those performances are easily viewed on Instagram or Snapchat. Evaluations can be more public and direct than pre-social media, and both the girl being evaluated and everyone else in the peer group has access to that evaluation.

Ringrose calls attention to the fact that the moral panic about girls' meanness and relational aggression is classed and racialized (2012). The pathologizing discourse about mean girls in the media focuses primarily on White, middle-class girls because these girls are supposed to be nice and good. Working class girls or girls of color who exhibit deviant behavior are instead positioned as physically aggressive. In a qualitative study in a public school with mostly African American

and White students, perceptions of girls' conflict were shaped by race, class, and sexuality (Waldron, 2011). Girls reinforced institutionalized assumptions of White femininity by excluding the 'preppy' White girls from accusations of girl-fighting. The bulk of the blame was put on girls of color who were perceived as 'ghetto girls.'

Although this research focuses on teenage girls, it is useful to look at studies that explore the social relations of younger girls. In a qualitative study of 1st-grade girls, distinct differences in social hierarchies and exclusion were found in two schools; one racially and socioeconomically diverse, and one predominantly students of color (Scott, 2003). In the racially diverse school, White girls assumed positions of high social status and engaged in exclusionary behaviors in which the 'out girl' was only ever Black. Other Black girls refrained from including the 'out girl' in accordance with the social rules that had been created by the high-status group. Assertive 'leadership skills' were encouraged in White girls, whilst admonished in Black girls. In contrast, the social dynamics of the school with predominantly Black and Latina students were egalitarian; sharing and inclusion were the norm. Whilst it is not possible to generalize the findings of this study to all schools, it is a clear indication that theories of girl culture based solely on studies of white girls are not universal norms.

Universal notions of girls as naturally mean have made their way into anti-bullying educational policy. It's common to find explanations that distinguish boys' bullying as physical and direct, whilst girls' bullying is characterized as covert and relational (Ringrose, 2008). Ringrose argues that anti-bullying discourse is limited because it ignores institutional heterosexuality and sociocultural dynamics in schools (2008). Educators are told to look out for psychological traits of aggressors and victims, but there is no move to interrogate heterosexual competition and class dynamics within school cultures. Ringrose finds that girls are expected to take on the emotional labor of sorting out friendship conflicts amongst themselves. Girls'

friendship dynamics are often belittled, and as a result, girls themselves often wish to conceal conflicts from teachers and parents to avoid the humiliation of public mediation (Hey, 1997; Ringrose, 2012). In addition, postfeminist discourses that position girls as educationally successful reinforce a perception that girls are doing all right, and can be left to their own devices. Ringrose does not attempt to argue whether meanness in girls is universal or not but instead explores the effect that this construct has on girls' cultures (2006). Girls are regulated, but in different ways depending on class. In White, middle-class society, parents read self-help books, and teachers bring in psychological experts to give school training about girls' relational aggression. For working-class girls or girls of color, their deviant behavior is disciplined and even criminalized (Fine, 1988; Ringrose, 2012).

Mobile and Computer-Mediated Communication

With the rising prominence of new media technologies in teenagers' lives, researchers of adolescent friendship behaviors began to explore the effects of social media and mobile communication. Moral panics in public discourse around sexting and cyberbullying contribute to a risk-centered narrative about girls' social media use (Ging & Norman, 2016; Hasinoff, 2014; Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, & Livingstone, 2013). In their study of teenage girls' understandings of gender, friendship, and conflict on Facebook, Ging and Norman found that girls were reluctant to label online hurtful behaviors as cyberbullying partly because of the perceived ambiguity of such actions, and partly because they didn't want to cause problems or make themselves a target (2016). The researchers concluded that the key obstacle to solving cyberbullying was not an absence of media literacy, but "a lack of empowerment to confront aggressors, discuss conflict openly with friends, or report hurtful incidents" (2016, p. 818). There was an acceptance amongst the participants that girls were naturally mean, and that the potential risks of losing friends or social status were too great. These findings support Brown's theory of girls' relationships and girl-

fighting as they give examples of the inextricable linkage of intimacy and conflict within girls' friendships (2003).

In the aforementioned study (Ging & Norman, 2016), as well as a study of girls' digitized sexual identities (Ringrose & Barajas, 2011), it was found that much of the cyberbullying was sexualized. Examples included sexual name-calling and the sharing or publication of nude pictures of other girls. Recent research into children's perceptions of cyberbullying demonstrate that there are complex inter- and intra-personal negotiations among children as to whether behaviors between friends should be denoted as cyberbullying (Canty, 2017). Whilst much of the cyberbullying that takes place in schools is difficult to resolve because of the anonymity afforded by digital platforms (Li, 2007), not all cyberbullying is anonymous. The *online disinhibition effect* describes how many people are more willing to self-disclose online and have less of a filter with regards to rude or threatening language (Suler, 2004). This phenomenon is a result of the interaction of factors such as *dissociative anonymity*, *invisibility*, *minimization of authority*, and *asynchronicity*. The feeling that there are no consequences to mean online behaviors leads children and adolescents to do and say things online which they wouldn't face-to-face. Researchers studying adolescent friendships must consider the ambiguities and variations among teenagers' perceptions of cyberbullying, as behaviors that adults categorize as cyberbullying may be perceived differently by adolescents.

For their research into the *App Generation*, Howard Gardner and Katie Davis conducted focus groups and interviews with teenagers (2013). They found that there were many benefits to the increased connectivity made available by mobile communication and social media. These benefits included maintaining long distance relationships with friends and family, finding and making connections with like-minded friends, and greater ease of self-disclosure. Apps allowed teenagers to make plans to spend time with each other in person, and frequent, casual interactions functioned as "virtual taps on the shoulder; establishing and maintaining a sense of connection

among friends who are physically separated” (2013, p. 95). Gardner and Davis argue that the negative consequences of social media and mobile communication in youth lives may detract from the potential benefits. The disruption and distraction of text messages and app notifications appeared to weaken the meaningfulness of in-person conversations and interactions. There is substantial evidence of a decline in empathy among young people since the 1980s, which correlates with the advent of new media technologies. Gardner and Davis point to one experimental study which concludes interaction with mobile technology decreases empathy.

For some young people, the disruption or interruption seems to be the “beginning of a connection,” and that they are in a constant state of waiting for such an interruption (Turkle, 2011, p. 172). Turkle argues that the constant connection and perceived support that adolescents experience with social media and mobile communication is not necessarily beneficial for their psychological development:

Adolescent autonomy is not just about separation from parents. Adolescents also need to separate from each other. They experience their friendships as both sustaining and constraining. Connectivity brings complications. Online life provides plenty of room for individual experimentation, but it can be hard to escape from new group demands. It is common for friends to expect that their friends will stay available—a technology-enabled social contract demands continual peer presence. And the tethered self becomes accustomed to its support. (2011, p. 174)

Turkle found in her research that as adolescents felt emotions forming they immediately sought out connection and support from their friends before they had time to process the emotion; “feelings are not fully experienced until they are communicated” (2011, p. 175). It did not always matter who that friend was, as long as someone replied to the text. Turkle suggests a fragile personality which requires constant support is reminiscent of a narcissistic personality, and that the on-demand

support from a mobile contact list may exacerbate such psychopathology. Turkle's overall argument is that as a society we are more connected, but this connection is not as deep or meaningful. Turkle also argues that our online presence is separate from who we are in the physical world, which could imply that the connections teenagers experience with their friends through apps and websites are with each other's 'second selves,' as opposed to their real or original selves.

Online spaces can provide fantastical, even utopic, spaces of identity creation and world-making. Sometimes there is an intense collision between online and offline realities, such as in the tragic and disturbing 'Slender Man' incident. Slender Man was a mythical character who became popular on online horror fiction sites. In 2014, two 12-year-old girls from Wisconsin became so fixated on the character that they stabbed their friend nearly to death to please the 'Slender Man' (Cosgrove, 2017). Did the blending of online and offline worlds in the girls' minds lead to their violent crime? This idea of the blended virtual and real worlds supports a theory of *augmented reality*, which challenges Turkle's dualistic online/offline viewpoint.

Nathan Jurgenson critiques digital/social media theorists such as Turkle for their continued use of the concept of 'digital dualism,' which views the digital or virtual world as a separate sphere from the physical or real world (2011). Jurgenson argues that "the digital and physical are increasingly meshed" (2011, p. 1) and uses an alternative theory of 'augmented reality':

And our selves are not separated across these two spheres as some dualistic "first" and "second" self but is instead an augmented self. A Haraway-like cyborg self comprised of a physical body as well as our digital Profile, acting in constant dialogue. Our Facebook profiles reflect whom we know and what we do offline, and our offline lives are impacted by what happens on Facebook (e.g., how we might change our behaviors in order to create more ideal documentation). (2011, p. 2)

Some feminist psychologists and media theorists have begun to explore how people experience

emotion, connection, or intimacy not just through a digital device, but towards the device itself. In a study of women's emotions towards the mobile, Fortunati and Taipale found that participants felt largely positive emotions towards their mobile phones and that it was a space where they managed their daily emotions (2012). For women, their emotions usually related to contact with their children or partners. As users store emotional content on their mobile devices, they feel more intimately attached to the device and thus more comfortable expressing their emotions through those devices (Cumiskey & Hjorth, 2017). Further research is needed to explore adolescents girls' emotions towards their mobile phones with regards to friends, family, or romantic partners. This is an area my research will support.

Social media theorist Emma Velez also explores emotion/feeling with regards to the ephemerality of digital platforms such as Snapchat (2014). Velez coins the term 'collective bursts of affect' to explain the collective feeling, connection and intimacy experienced by Snapchat users: "the ephemeral temporality of a Snap generates a kind of intimacy that is akin to a secret. It allows us to retain our memory of the conversation without being required to store it" (2014, para. 20). This concept of secret intimacies is similar to the note-passing practices of the girls in Hey's study (1997).

Polymedia and Mediated Co-presence

Digital media scholars Madianou and Miller developed the theory of polymedia to describe the relational environment of communicative technologies: "polymedia is an emerging environment of communicative opportunities that functions as an 'integrated structure' within which each individual medium is defined in relational terms in the context of all other media" (Madianou & Miller, 2013, p. 170). Madianou and Miller developed this theory from an ethnographic study of Filipino migrants living in the UK who used polymedia to maintain family relationships across long distances. The theory emphasizes the emotional intent that goes into

choosing a particular medium; the decision is based on social and emotional reasons as opposed to technical or economic considerations (i.e., an individual's digital literacy capabilities or the cost of using a particular method of communication). Polymedia allows users to emotionally manage mediated relationships by switching platforms, and the smartphone makes this flexibility much easier (Madianou, 2014). The choice of platform is constitutive of the relationship, defining the meaning for the individuals involved and communicating information about that relationship to others. The smartphone allows users to be 'always on' (boyd, 2012), facilitating a seamless switching between different platforms, as well as a fluid transition between being online and offline. boyd argues that adolescents have embraced the 'always on' lifestyle more than older generations, although there are certainly plenty of young people who have rejected the constant connection. The 'always on' lifestyle also allows users to be constantly impacted by remote others in ways which can sometimes flow continuously with our daily lives and experiences, and which can sometimes be disrupting and distracting (Cumiskey & Hjorth, 2017).

Mediated co-presence is the concept that people can be present at the same time in a digital and psychological space, as opposed to a physical or geographical place. It is "the mediated experience of feelings in the presence of remote others" (Cumiskey & Hjorth, 2017, p. 26):

Co-presence emphasizes the device's ability to assist the user in formulating an intensely emotional and affective augmented reality that is ever-present but not dependent on a stable relationship with physical structures (outside of the necessary infrastructure for mobile communication—the device itself, cell towers, power sources, satellites, etc.). (p. 26)

Cumiskey and Hjorth (2017) emphasize the significance of emotion in mediated co-presence, arguing that "mobile-emotive contexts provide the "space" for intimate co-presence" (p. 26). When people process emotional experiences through their mobile phones, such as posting information about a break-up, a loss, a marriage, or the birth of a baby, these become *mobile-emotive contexts*.

These contexts allow for intimate, mediated co-presence because of the heightened emotions contained within the mobile interactions or content.

Madianou makes the distinction between mediated co-presence and her theory of ambient co-presence (2016). While mediated co-presence requires direct interaction between the people involved, ambient co-presence involves a “peripheral awareness of distant others” (2016, p. 189) and their lives, activities, and routines; “made possible through the rich environment of polymedia” (2016, p. 196). In addition to the peripheral awareness of a close friend, family member, or partner, ambient co-presence extends to the larger community that person is involved in: “Ambient community provides social context, while it enhances users’ sense of belonging by immersing them into emotional and moral spaces” (2016, p. 198). Although these theories were generated to describe the mediated relationships of transnational migrants, Madaniaou stresses that they can and should be used beyond migrant research to help explain mediated relationships and environments in general.

Haythornthwaite developed a related theory of ‘media multiplexity,’ which is the use of multiple media platforms to maintain relationships (2005) . *Relational multiplexity* describes when people maintain multiple relations. Strong ties are pair relationships that involve emotional and social support. Haythornthwaite found that strongly tied relationships predicted greater *media multiplexity* and that understanding the relationships of pairs was essential to learning about behaviors in small groups, larger social circles, and society as a whole. This is particularly relevant to research into girls’ friendships insofar as the dyadic or triadic relationships between girls is inseparable from the larger peer group.

Hall and Baym (2012) found that their study of the effects of texting and calling on friendship expectations supported the idea of ‘media multiplexity,’ in that both methods of communication uniquely impacted mobile maintenance expectations within friendships (relational

assumptions made possible by technology). As the number of texts and calls to a friend increased, so did the expectation that a friend should respond and be available via mobile. The study did not take into consideration other mobile apps that are now frequently used to maintain relationships such as Instagram, Snapchat, FaceTime or WhatsApp. Hall and Baym's findings might suggest that the increased array of options for media interaction within relationships would increase mobile maintenance expectations across these different platforms in different ways. Presently, there has been no empirical research into Snapchat streaks (or Snapstreaks), which require users to send a 'snap' (photo) back and forth to friends to maintain the *streak* (signified on the app as a number representing the days the streak has been alive). Reports of this phenomenon by journalists imply that users who participate in Snapchat streaks feel pressure within relationships to maintain the streak, even if they don't have anything they want to say or share with the friend (Bindley, 2017; Cove, 2017). With texting or calling, it is not as explicitly obvious how well a friend has maintained a relationship (unless you regularly check your call logs and text messages to make sure they contacted you every day). Snapchat's streak technology provides an at-a-glance numerical figure allowing someone to evaluate performances of friendship quantitatively.

My overarching research question asks how girls who attend summer camp use social media and mobile communication throughout the school year to build upon their camp friendships and continue the social and emotional support they felt at camp. In order to answer this question, I ask the following: Does a virtual-symbolic camp space exist for the girls (through which they connect and communicate)? How is that space maintained? Why do the girls need the virtual-symbolic camp? Are the girls using that space as a way of accessing social and emotional support?

Method

The aim of this study was to do an exploration of teenage girls' perceptions of social media and mobile communication within their camp and school friendships. Since a lot of the narratives

about teenage cell phone use are controlled by adults, it was important to highlight the voices of adolescent girls and try to understand their perspectives and lived realities. The objective of this study was not to provide answers to potential positive or negative outcomes of adolescent social media use, but to illustrate the nuances and ambivalences of a phenomenon that has become such a predominant part of contemporary life. I chose to include only girls in the project because of the important and intense role that friendship plays in female adolescence. In addition, panics about teenage social media use are often gendered. Topics such as cyber-bullying, the impact of social media on body image, (self-)sexualization, and sexting, are viewed as larger problems among girls. Even the concern about the use of online pornography among adolescents, which is higher among boys, is positioned as a bigger problem for girls. Girls supposedly experience the negative effects of such sexual media consumption (Peter & Valkenburg, 2016; Sales, 2016). I also chose a female participant group because of my observations of summer camp as a safe and liberatory space for girls. In comparison to the behaviors and personalities of girls of the same age, race, and socio-economic background who attended the public middle school where I used to teach, I perceived that girls at camp were more confident, outspoken, independent, and kinder than at school.

I followed the lead of childhood studies scholars who position children and adolescents as experts of their own lives. This is particularly true when studying social media because the current generation of children and teenagers use new media technology in vastly different ways to how my generation used it. I chose a qualitative approach because it requires in-depth analysis of participants' words. Qualitative research allows for more detailed and descriptive representation of the different ways teenagers use digital technology in their friendships.

In this section, I first provide a detailed description of the research site, Camp Sycamore¹,

¹ I use the pseudonym Camp Sycamore throughout the paper to protect the identities of the participants.

and explain why it is an apt place to conduct research in this area of study. Next, I explore my positionality as a member of the Camp Sycamore community and as a researcher. Finally, I lay out the research and data analysis procedures used in this study.

The site of study: Camp Sycamore

The primary reason I chose an overnight summer camp, Camp Sycamore, as the research site is because it is a technology-free environment. Campers are not allowed phones, tablets, or computers, and this is strictly enforced. The policy has been in place ever since iPods, mobile devices, and laptops have been around, although cameras are allowed. The camp has found parents to be supportive of this rule and that they ensure their children leave their devices at home. This policy is integral to the tradition of American summer camps. When the earliest US camps were established in the late 19th century, they were designed to give children an escape from modern, urban, and industrial life (M. B. Smith, 2006; “Summer Camp, History Of,” 2016). Originally, summer camps offered a very basic, back-to-nature environment, without any modern appliances, indoor plumbing, or electricity. As camps became more common and popular, activities such as movie nights were introduced and modern facilities became the norm. The core value of providing an escape from modern technology has remained the same and camps today position themselves as the last place where kids can be free of their iPhones and computers (“Cultivating Camp’s Tech-free Traditions in the Digital Age,” 2015; “Summer Camp, History Of,” 2016; M. B. Smith, 2006).

Camp Sycamore is located in a rural area in New England where there is no cellular service or public WiFi so even if campers had hidden their phones in their trunks or suitcases, they would not be able to access the internet. I wanted the participants in the study to be able to reflect on their friendships and use of social media at first while they were disconnected. I hypothesized that this would bring about greater insight into their experiences and observations because they would be able to compare their friendships at camp with their friendships at home and in school. I would

then explore their perspectives a few months later in follow-up interviews when they had been back in the connected world for some time. I was also aware that although they did not use social media or mobile communication while at camp, many campers used technology to communicate during the school year. Summer camps and other residential programs which employ no-technology rules provide the rare opportunity to study teenagers in a context where they do not have access to their phones. Even if a researcher designed a study where the participants had to relinquish use of their phones or laptops for an extended period of time, it would be difficult to maintain distance from other people in their lives who did have access to technology.

Camp Sycamore is a traditional, co-educational, ‘sleepaway’ camp situated on a large lake in rural New England. There are a variety of activities available such as watersports, archery, arts and crafts, music, and backpacking. The camp runs free-choice programming, which allows campers to choose which activities to attend each day. The activities are co-educational and all-age. Campers are only required to be with their same-gender/age cabin during meal times and at night time. Campers can attend from the age of 8 to 15, and at 16 they may apply to become counselors-in-training. Camp staff, known as counselors, are aged 18 and over and are mostly college students or teachers who were campers themselves and came through the counselor-in-training program. Each year 5-10 international staff from the UK, Australia, and New Zealand, are hired from recruitment databases.

Camp Sycamore is a non-profit organization overseen by a board of trustees, who appoint directors who are responsible for the management of the camp. Sycamore is over 100 years old with a large alumni network; many of the kids are second or third generation campers. The summer is split up into four 2-week sessions, and campers can attend for as many sessions as they wish. Most campers tend to come to the same sessions each year, and there is a high returning camper rate. This means that the older campers tend to spend multiple summers with each other. Campers

are grouped in cabins by age and gender. Recruitment of new campers takes place largely by word-of-mouth, with children or siblings of alumni making up a significant proportion of the camper community. There are often multiple families from the same schools or towns. This also contributes to the social and racial homogeneity of the camp. The majority of the families are white and middle-class. It was not possible to obtain actual data on this as the camp does not collect information about race, ethnicity, or socio-economic background in its registration forms. The camp is one of the more affordable camps in New England and gives out multiple scholarships for families who need financial assistance. One of the missions of the incoming camp directors is to increase the diversity of the campers by actively recruiting campers from communities of color, hiring more staff of color, and implementing diversity training into staff orientation. The camp has a large community of Canadian campers from Montreal and Quebec City, so there are many campers whose first language is French. Most of those parents send their children to camp explicitly to learn or improve their English.

I knew before entering the study that there was a high probability that the research sample would be predominately white and middle class. This is also the trend in summer camps across the country. The American Camp Association conducts camper enrollment surveys each year and found that in 2017, 70% of overnight campers in the US are White, and 29% of campers are Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino(a), Asian, Multi-racial, or other non-white races/ethnicities (“Trends in Camper Enrollment and Staff Recruitment Reports,” 2015). Although it is a limitation of the study that the sample is not representative, the aim of this research project was not to reach generalizable conclusions about teenage friendships and social media use across all demographics. Instead, I aimed to explore in depth and detail how a group of girls used social media and mobile communication in their specific friendship. I intend to illustrate different processes and behaviors that are employed by adolescents but lost within broader research surveys.

My experience and positionality

The other key reason I chose Camp Sycamore for my research is that of my role there as Assistant Camp Director. I was a camp counselor from 2008-2011 and took on the Assistant Director position in 2012. I expected that my position within the camp would help the participants and their parents trust me as a researcher, and this would positively impact the number of girls who agreed to take part in the study. I also felt confident that the camp director would give me permission to conduct the research during the summer, and would allow me access to parent contact information for recruitment purposes. I did not have to deal with gatekeepers that are usually present when conducting research in schools. Having observed campers forming and maintaining apparently strong and meaningful relationships at Camp Sycamore, I expected that the participants would have a lot to say about their friendships. I thought that because most of the girls knew me, they would feel comfortable talking in detail about their personal lives. When I was a cabin counselor, the campers I looked after shared a lot of information with me about their friendships at camp and at school. Whilst I do not have as close relationships with the campers in my current role, I am a frequent presence in the campers' daily lives because I make announcements at every meal and spend much of my day visiting different program areas.

My perspective and positionality is another tool for analysis. My *reflexive insider knowledge* (Moore & Measham, 2006) allows me insight into the culture and routines of the camp. I understand camp language and experiences that might go unnoticed by an outside researcher. As a result, I must take care to explain aspects of camp that are not obvious but that I might take for granted. Reflexivity is a crucial component of my methodology because it provides a critical tool to deconstruct any positive bias I may have towards the camp. Potential bias could come from my own emotional connection toward the camp; it is an important place in my life, and I have made many close friends over the years. I also care about the continued success of the camp as a

business, so it is vital that I am not censoring any relevant information that might show the camp in a negative light. I must also be reflexive in terms of my relationships with the participants and how I present their experiences in my thesis. Although I will be using pseudonyms to protect their identity, it is likely that a girl may recognize her story within this paper. Knowing that this is possible causes me to think carefully about how I write about the girls' experiences because I do not wish to harm the girls' emotionally or socially.

My reflexive insider knowledge also extends to social media and mobile communication. In a study of female friendship behaviors on Facebook, the researchers (who are Facebook users themselves) "challenge the assumption that a valid understanding of online cultures can only be derived from an objective and distant appraisal of 'real' users thereby disturbing the researcher/researched binary" (R. Brown & Gregg, 2012, p. 358). As a user of social media and mobile communication, I enact many of the online friendship behaviors of the research participants. Technology plays a significant role in my life, so I engage in a "sympathetic reading" (2012, p. 358) of the young participants' use of social media and mobile communication.

Procedures

In this section, I first explain the methods I used to recruit participants for the study and gain informed consent. I then describe the interview and focus group procedures, including information about the types of question asked. Finally, I explain the qualitative data analysis methods used and summarize the key themes.

Recruitment

A non-probability sample was generated through recruitment at Camp Sycamore. I sought a sample of 15-30 female campers aged 13-15 who would be attending camp during the summer of 2017. I chose to limit the age range of the sample to 13-15 because most social media platforms use

13 as the age requirement for users² and because 15 is the upper age limit of campers at Sycamore. After receiving permission from the camp director, the camp registrar gave me the names and email addresses of all the parents of eligible campers. I sent a recruitment email to these parents and received positive responses from 22 parents who confirmed their daughters were willing to participate. The parents were required to submit the informed consent forms prior to or at the time of their daughter's arrival at camp, and an adolescent assent form was given to the participants immediately before the interview. It was made clear on multiple occasions before, and during that, participation was voluntary, and that child or parent could remove themselves from the project. All research procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board at The Graduate Center, CUNY. The project was found to present minimal risk to the participants. The Parental Informed Consent and Adolescent Assent forms warned that participants might experience emotional distress if the interview topics brought up upsetting memories such as bullying experiences.

Data Collection

While camp was in session, I interviewed each participant individually during their free time hours. Each individual interview lasted 25-30 minutes. At the beginning of the camp session, I (re)introduced myself to the participant during free time and found a mutually beneficial time to conduct the interview. The interviews took place in the Alumni Room or my office, both quiet rooms which can be locked and are not accessible to campers or staff without permission. I conducted semi-structured interviews using a list of predetermined questions. I did not always keep the order of questions since depending on the participant's response it sometimes made more sense to ask different questions at different times. I asked follow-up questions to obtain clarification or more detailed descriptions and to understand why the participants gave certain responses. The

² Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Snapchat all require users to be 13 and over (Bennett, 2014)

interview guide consisted of open-ended questions about the participants' camp and school friendships, descriptions of, emotions towards and evaluations of individual friends, friend groups, and peer networks. I asked the participants to tell stories and memories of significant moments within their friendships that evoked positive or negative affect. I waited to bring up the topic of social media or technology within friendships until the participants mentioned it organically. I did not want to impose my assumption of the importance of social media and mobile communication within friendships. I brought it up first only if the interview was drawing to an end and the participant had still not mentioned technology in any capacity. When the concept of friendship 'drama' was continually mentioned in the first few interviews, I added a related question to the interview guide.

Each girl also took part in a focus group, which lasted 35-45 minutes. These also took place in the Alumni Room or my office, with the participants (and myself) sat in a circle of chairs so we could all see each other. Initially, I planned to assign each participant a focus group by age so that it was more likely the participants would be friendly with each other. I expected that this familiarity would facilitate group discussion. Due to the changing commitments and conflicts of both the participants and myself, this proved difficult. Additionally, participants in the study attended camp during different sessions, so it was not always possible to group the campers by age. The first focus group contained six girls, five who were 15 years old and in their final years as campers, and one who was 14 years old but who was a member of the same cabin as two of the other girls. These girls all knew each other well as they had been in the same cabins together for multiple summers. The second focus group contained nine girls aged between 13 and 15. There was less familiarity across the whole group although there were close dyads and triads within the group. The third focus group contained three girls aged 13-14 who had shared cabins at least for one summer. The fourth focus group contained four girls aged 14-15 years old who were less familiar as a group.

During the focus groups, I asked the participants to think of questions they would like to pose to the group about girls' friendship. This often led to organic questioning and conversation among the group and only when participation waned did I facilitate the discussion by prompting someone else to ask a question, or by asking a question myself. I found that I had to facilitate more in the 9 participant focus group, possibly because the girls did not know each other as well, and likely because the group was too big for natural conversation.

I requested follow-up Skype interviews with seven of the participants in January 2018: Sara, Emily, Ophelia, Mary, Melissa, Ashley, and Lily (pseudonyms are used throughout to protect the confidentiality of the participants.) These girls were the 14 and 15-year-old campers who had taken part in the first focus group. In addition, there was one 15-year-old girl who took part in the second focus group, but who would have otherwise been sorted in the former if not for her delayed arrival at camp. I conducted the Skype interviews with 6 out of 7 girls because I received no response from one of the participants.³ I chose this subset of the original research sample because this friendship group had identified each other as close friends, and had made clear that they would use social media to maintain these friendships during the school year. The Skype interviews were scheduled using an online scheduling website and lasted 20-25 minutes. These interviews were also semi-structured and the questions focused on the following topics: feelings towards camp friends, maintenance of camp relationships during the school year, and the role of social media/mobile communication in their friendships.

All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded. I also wrote field notes after each interview or focus group. I did not conduct formal participant observation during the summer. However, I had daily interactions with most of the girls because of my role as assistant camp

³ After emailing Ashley twice, I chose not to follow-up because I did not want her to feel pressured. I had told all the girls multiple times that the study was voluntary, and that they could discontinue their involvement at any time. I didn't want her to feel obligated to respond by emailing her repeatedly.

director. I frequently witnessed the participants interacting with their friends around camp. Sometimes counselors would talk to me about camp issues unrelated to my research project, which involved one or more of the participants. This expanded knowledge of the participants and their contexts inform my analysis.

Data Analysis

I analyzed the data using a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). After transcribing the interview and focus group audio recordings, I used a CAQDAS software (Atlas.ti) to code the transcripts. By employing *in vivo* coding, I centered the participants' voices: "child and adolescent voices are often marginalized, and coding with their actual words enhances and deepens an adult's understanding of their cultures and worldviews" (Saldaña, 2015, p. 91). Through multiple iterative coding cycles four key themes emerged: the *virtual-symbolic camp* – the girls' construction of camp which is not the physical place, but is a space that lives in their minds, their relationships with each other, and online; *communication and connection* – the processes that maintain the girls' relationships to each other when they are not physically present; *emotional/social support* – the behaviors and characteristics that are essential components of the friendships, and that are mediated by communication and connection; and *drama* – conflict, negativity or challenges among friends or peers, and the reason why emotional/social support is sought or given.

Findings

I begin this section by profiling the seven girls who are the primary subjects of analysis. I also include a diagram illustrating the friendship connections within the group. I then present the four key themes that arose from the data analysis: the Virtual-Symbolic Camp, Communication and Connection, Emotional/Social Support, and Drama. I provide evidence from the data to demonstrate the salience of these themes, centering the girls' voices with key quotations from their

interviews.

Participant Profiles: The Girls

This section provides detailed profiles of the seven girls who are the main focus of this study and their relationships with each other. There are other girls who are important players in their friendship group, but who did not participate in the research project. The girls were all in the two oldest girls' cabins, and have been attending camp for many years. They are well-known by staff and campers. Melissa, Ophelia, Mary, Emily, and Lily stayed for two sessions (4 weeks) while Sara and Ashley only stayed for the first session (2 weeks).

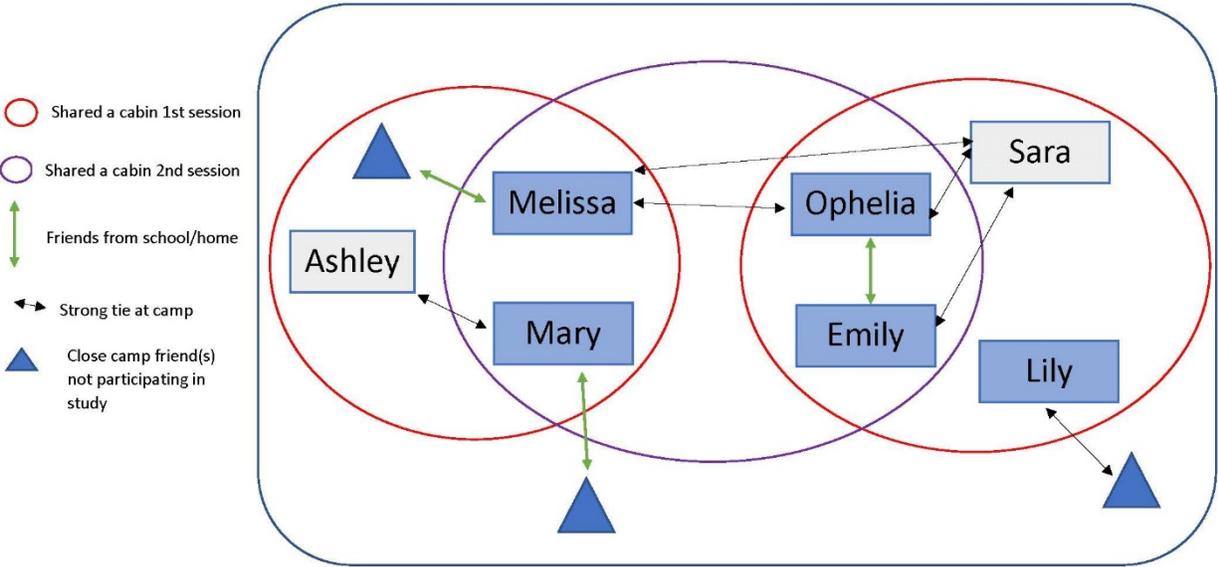


Figure 1. Friendship connections between the seven girls explicitly referenced during interviews

The girls sometimes struggled to pinpoint moments when their connections with their friends began or grew stronger. For most, being in a cabin with someone was the most significant context for building a strong relationship. Within the camp schedule, there are multiple opportunities for collaboration and competitions, which facilitate the bonding within a cabin group. Each morning, cabins complete camp duties together such as sweeping the dining hall after breakfast or cleaning the bathrooms. They also perform cabin clean-up duties before dinner.

Throughout the summer there are events that require the cabins to work together to plan a skit or song for a campfire. Evening programs often entail inter-cabin competition. There is an ‘Honor Cabin’ award which goes to the cabin that had the highest score during cabin cleanliness inspections. These examples of collaboration and competition mirror the way the boy campers bonded together in the Robbers Cave Experiment (Sherif, 1961). Unlike the Robbers Cave Experiment, inter-group competition between cabins at Camp Sycamore does not lead to serious conflict; one of the primary responsibilities of the camp counselors is to resolve conflict, bullying, or friction between or within cabin groups. Part of the camp’s philosophy is that all children are accepted and included. During the week-long counselor orientation, staff attends training workshops on conflict resolution, bullying, homesickness, and sexual harassment. They participate in interactive exercises where they practice dealing with such issues, and they spend time discussing preventative strategies. They also engage in reflective exercises where they examine peer relationships within the staff and are made aware their actions have a significant impact on the campers’ behaviors.

Melissa, 15

Melissa has been coming to camp for six years. Her older sister attended first and then she started coming. One of her closest friends at school also comes to camp but didn’t participate in the study. Melissa is particularly close to Sara, Ophelia, and Emily. She remembers forming a bond with one of her close friends when they were 9 years old because they found out they both woke up early. She became close with her camp friends because of living together in “condensed time” and because “at night, or just in the cabin, you talk a lot and like understand their life beyond camp, and then also just like, like seeing how they interact and like their manners, and it's like you really understand how they are as people.” Melissa spoke a lot about how her friendship circles at school had changed since moving to high school. She reflected that in the past, she felt an obligation to

hang out with certain people because of the clique she was part of, but that now she didn't always respect their decisions. She found herself drifting towards people she trusted more, and who she thought were better people.

Emily, 15

Emily has been coming to camp for four years. Her best friend from home, Ophelia, started coming at the same time after their older sisters both attended. They were not best friends until they started coming to camp together, and they both believe that camp has made their friendship stronger. Emily and Ophelia went through some challenges when two members of their close-knit friendship group (who also attended camp in the past) moved schools. Emily and these two girls got in a fight and split apart. As Ophelia and Emily became part of a new, wider friendship group, Emily did not feel comfortable. She moved towards a different group of friends but ultimately was really unhappy. She and Ophelia remained close, but Emily decided to move schools in the Fall. She now attends an all-girls private school and is so much happier. Her and Ophelia don't get to see each other every day in school but see each other more at the weekend and are always in contact via mobile and social media. Emily is also very close to Sara and Melissa.

Ophelia, 15

Ophelia has been coming to camp for four years. When the situation with Emily and their other two friends happened, Emily wouldn't tell Ophelia exactly what went down. Ophelia was happy to stay within the new friendship group that Emily had felt uncomfortable with, but understood that Emily needed something different. They stayed best friends whilst hanging out in different friendship groups. This year was difficult for her with Emily moving schools, but they are just as close. Ophelia keeps an intense sports schedule and is very focused on academics so doesn't have a lot of time to focus on her social life. She recognizes that her friendship group is the popular group, and notes that some of her friends who she isn't as close to look down on other people.

Ophelia shared a story of how she and her camp friends bonded when they were out sailing, and the rudder broke off. They had to swim the boat back to the docks, and they were all yelling and hysterically laughing.

Sara, 15

Sara has been coming to camp for four years. She has only become really close with the other girls during the past two years. The girls whom she used to be best friends with stopped coming. She is closest to Emily, Melissa, and Ophelia. Sara shared a story in the focus group of a performance her cabin had given at camp where they acted silly and crazy in front of everyone. She expressed that this was the kind of thing she could only do with her camp friends and that she felt more herself. Outside of camp, Sara keeps regular contact with her camp friends, particularly Emily, who she FaceTimes with every Tuesday at 8pm. They both have gone through friendship challenges at school and understand each other's experiences.

Ashley, 15

Ashley has been coming to camp for six years. She lives in the same town as Melissa and some other campers but goes to a different school. They were friends before coming to camp but became closer at camp. Her best friend at camp is Mary. Mary also had been best friends with a girl who was usually in an older cabin, and this sometimes caused problems when they both wanted to hang out with Mary (but not with each other.) Her other good friends are Sara, Emily, and Ophelia. Last year at school, Ashley decided to change friendship groups when she felt uncomfortable with the decisions her friends were making when they went to high school (about going to parties and fitting in.) I was unable to schedule a follow-up Skype interview with Ashley – I emailed her mother first, who said I should contact Ashley directly, but I didn't receive a response.

Mary, 15

Mary has been coming to camp for six years. She was unable to attend camp last summer.

When we interviewed at the beginning of camp, she was finding it difficult because her best (older) friends had become counselors-in-training and she wasn't as close to the girls in her cabin. By the time we had the focus group, she seemed to have a stronger connection with the other girls. Mary lived abroad for a number of years and went to an international school. She felt that the girls at her new school in the US were far less welcoming and inclusive than those at her old school.

Lily, 14

Lily has been coming to camp for three years. She was the only 14-year-old in a cabin of 15-year-olds, which meant that everyone apart from her was in their final year as a camper. This happened because she has an early birthday. She had shared cabins with many of the girls before, but she wouldn't count them as her closest friends. She is very independent and likes to go to different program areas than the other girls, but she enjoys spending time with them and gives them advice and comfort when she thinks it is needed. She is on the edge of the friendship group because of her age, but not an outsider. It was apparent from the focus group that she shared a strong emotional connection with the girls. Lily was extremely homesick her first summer as a camper and is proud of how she conquered those feelings. Lily lives in the South, and her experiences of racial divisions within the school social structure were very different from any of the other girls' experiences.

Virtual-symbolic camp

In the Method section, I described in detail the literal-physical camp. Camp Sycamore also exists digitally/virtually and in the minds of the people who consider themselves a member of the camp community. Even though camp is a physical space, and one where the use of technology is prohibited, this does not mean that camp exists in contrast to a digital/virtual world, or to a digitally augmented world (Jurgenson, 2011). The literal representation of camp provides material for a virtual-symbolic version of camp, but these spaces are enmeshed.

Camp Sycamore is frequently referred to by the girls, and by the larger camp community, as a “bubble,” a bounded space, which is differently connected to the outside world. Inside they experience true belonging, and only those inside the bubble understand what is going on. When the girls leave the bubble, their “school friends just don’t get it,” and since the connection the girls feel to camp and to the people inside that bubble is “incredible,” they probably never will. All the girls in this study spoke of camp as a place where everyone was included and accepted. In one of the focus groups, the girls debated whether only certain types of people can really *get* camp, or if camp itself is what changes people such that they emotionally identify with the space and each other. All the girls used strong emotional language to describe their love of camp; Mary told the focus group that when she had had to miss a year, it felt as if “a part of me was missing.” Sara used the phrase “the opposite of loneliness,” a concept she had read in a book of the same name (Keegan, 2015), and the rest of the girls in the focus group murmured their agreement.

The girls shared a central belief that camp was a space where they could transcend their individual situations at school, which were ruled by “girl drama,” “fakeness,” “social climbing” and “cliques.” At camp, there was an “unspoken agreement” that “girls would be good to each other;” everyone at camp was the “best version of themselves.” Although while at camp, there is a defined number of people present at any one time, the camp community as a whole does not have such clear boundaries as it stretches through time and across distance. The camp community and everything it represented for the girls while they were in the physical place is also present in text messages, group chats, Snapchats, and Instagram posts. Memory of the self and others at camp seeps into behaviors at school or at home. The literal-physical camp lays the groundwork for the virtual-symbolic camp. The virtual-symbolic camp also bleeds into the literal-physical camp, as interactions and memories from social media carry through into the physical camp each summer:

e.g., the girls take photos while they are getting ready for dinner with the intention of posting them on Instagram once camp is over and they are reunited with their phones.

There are various dimensions of the virtual-symbolic camp space that the girls co-construct with each method of communication or connection. Text messaging and FaceTime are the primary methods the girls use to have meaningful one-to-one conversations that mirror such exchanges they were used to at camp, although text messaging can also be used as a quick check-in, a reminder that they are still there, or a tap on the shoulder (Gardner & Davis, 2013). Often texting was used to instigate a FaceTime conversation, which the girls generally felt was a more meaningful way to stay connected:

Emily: Um, Sara and I FaceTime every Tuesday night at 8:00

Camp Interview (CI) 7

Mary: We text a lot. I text a lot with some of them, not all of them, and we have a big group chat, but I don't really use it that often.

Skype Interview (SI) 2

Ophelia: Well actually a few days ago, I got a text from Sara. She's like, oh my gosh, I think it was right before New Year's, and she's like, "Oh, I miss you. We should FaceTime."

SI 4

Group communication, including group video messaging/conferencing apps, group messages, Instagram Direct, and Snapchat groups, provide a space to experience the same positive group dynamics they experienced at camp. Instagram Direct is a messaging service on the Instagram app which allows group chats. Snapchat is a platform where users send disappearing photos and messages to each other. Most of the interactions take place privately between two people; however

Snapchat groups allow up to 16 people to share conversations and media. The group chats self-delete within 24 hours.

Sara: We have this huge Snapchat group of all the cabin 1 and 1A girls. It's funny because we'll Snapchat and everyone was sending videos of them submitting their application. That was really fun. You see their faces and they're like, "Oh my God." It's just fun.

SI 5

Instagram was used as a way to feel connected to each other without always being in direct communication; it was a window into each other's lives, and it also provided bursts of happy emotion when a camp friend posted a photo or commented on/liked their own. Instagram allows users to post photos and videos on their feeds, adding photographic filters to improve the appearance of posts. Instagram feeds are typically more curated than photos sent on Snapchat, as they are public-facing and more permanent.

Emily: Instagram is nice because I get to see what they're up to, something they wouldn't necessarily tell me over the phone, or for camp friends that I'm not as close with that I wouldn't go and call them. I always like everything and I comment. I'm like, "Hello, I miss you" or something like that. It's just fun. I think that kind of thing is fun.

SI 3

The different dimensions of communication and connection form the infrastructure of the virtual-symbolic camp. The infrastructure includes more passive dimensions, such as viewing, but not actively interacting with, photos or old text messages. The virtual-symbolic camp interacts differently with time. When the girls are actively in the virtual-symbolic camp, communicating

with their camp friends, there is a shared feeling that “no time has gone by” since the last time they spoke.

Communication vs. connection

A key theme that emerged was the ways the girls defined connection with their camp friends through social media and mobile communication, and how it made them feel.

Sara: I can't quite find the words for it. It's almost like even though we're separated by three states or for Fiona or some other people, whole countries, it's like you pick up the phone and it's like they're right there next to you at camp again, in the bunk bed or whatever, gossiping. It's just like everything connects back to those feelings that you have at camp and that's what makes it so easy in my opinion.

SI 5

All of the girls in the follow-up Skype interviews spoke in some way about how social media or mobile communication made them feel connected to their friends from camp and camp itself. This connection ignited emotions that they attached to the feelings they had while at camp. Sometimes these emotions related to feeling secure that the friendships were still intact and as meaningful as they were at camp:

Mary: It makes me feel really happy that we're all still keeping in contact, and we're just as good as friends as we were at camp.

SI 2

Sara: I know on my birthday I always look for the camp people's posts first because it's like even if you haven't talked to them in a while it's just so nice to reaffirm the sweet things they say about you. All of them end with the same thing like, "This girl is my best friend." You know what I'm saying? It's awesome. I love seeing that even if it's not for me or to me. I love reading people's comments to each other. It's so

great.

SI 5

Keeping up a commitment to stay in contact with their camp friends led to feelings of happiness because it supported their belief that those friendships were mutually important to each other. Receiving birthday posts and comments containing affirmations of love and “best friend” labels is further evidence of the shared value of the friendship. This reinforcement was necessary because the girls lived in different states or countries. Sometimes, it was difficult to maintain regular communication with camp friends because of their busy school and extra-curricular schedules, but a few of the girls spoke to the security they felt knowing that their camp friends were “always there.”

Lily: The thing about camp friends is they're always there. They're always gonna (sic) remind you of that good time, regardless of if they're like 1600 miles away or if they're coming up to meet you in camp in like a day.

SI 1

Ophelia: It's good to have that part of you every day

SI 4

Sara: It's cool because you haven't talked to them in a while. It's just like a friendly reminder that we're still here.

SI 5

Although the girls frequently acknowledged that they missed their camp friends, and this sometimes made them sad, the secure feeling of knowing their camp friends were there was expressed as a positive. This feeling of them always being there was sometimes reinforced by direct communication such as receiving a text, Instagram like/comment, or Snapchat. At other times the girls would experience this feeling of connection and happiness by looking through

photos on their phone, or reading old messages:

Lily: I still have the chat open. She did it on Instagram Direct and I still keep the chats open. I don't ... Because you can get rid of chats and I keep them open. And I look back to them and it does make you smile because that was a time when you talk to your friends and they were there for you and you were there for them. And it's nice.

SI 1

Mary: At least once a day. Whether I'm going through my pictures, or just I see someone's name and it just comes back.

Int.: Yeah. And what is the emotion that you feel when you think about camp?

Mary: It's really just happiness. Having people to share those experiences with.

SI 2

In these instances, the girls feel connection and emotion with mobile content that is not an active interaction. The content is related to one of their friends, but they are not actively communicating with their friends at that moment. The connection could be one of nostalgia, such as one might have felt looking at a photo album or reading a letter from a loved one. There could also be a connection with and emotion toward the mobile device itself. The device becomes an object that frequently provides the feeling of connection that induces an emotional lift.

Some of the girls also spoke of feeling connected to their friends through seeing their day-to-day lives on Instagram and Snapchat:

Mary: That also just, it lets us see how everyone's doing, maybe like a fun vacation they had or something like that, without them having to go into a whole story about how their day was. It's just a quick thing that you see, and then you know that they're having a good time or they're doing okay

SI 2

Sara: Like, I love seeing them, like, in what they're doing. Like, in their regular lives. Like, it's just funny to me cause, like, I see them at camp and then, like, on my screen you can see, "Oh, this is what they did this weekend or whatever."

CI 1

Also, personally, it makes me happy when I'm in school or on the weekends and I'm scrolling through Instagram or something like that and a picture of them with their friends at home pops up. I'm just like, "Aww." It's nice to see them happy. It's nice to see them having a good year. You know what I'm saying?

SI 5

It was important for the girls to know that their friends were happy and doing okay and seeing photos they had posted gave them this assurance. The girls also mentioned separately that people tended to only present the best version of themselves and their lives on Instagram, so it is surprising that the girls would take it as given that their friends' apparent happiness on social media was genuine. When the girls were aware that there might also be challenges in their friends' lives, they did also make sure to check in regularly with that friend via text.

Social and Emotional Support

One of the primary reasons the girls sought connection with their camp friends via mobile and computer-mediated communication was for social or emotional support to help them deal with friendship challenges and 'drama' at school or at home.

Ophelia: If we're talking, it's because we're looking for advice or we had something that reminded us of them, so it isn't just kind of like that random conversation

SI 4

Sara: Sometimes I'll get a text from Emily or a text from Melissa or whoever and it'll be like, "I really need someone to talk to. Can you call me?" I've done that a bunch of

times. Then those conversations will just be a 20-minute session of them ranting and they're like, "I can't talk to anyone else about this because it has to do with drama between girls in my friend group and I've been really upset about it." They'll tell me the whole story and then I'll try to give my piece of advice or whatever I can do and just be there for them

SI 5

The finding that these girls seek social support when they are dealing with 'drama' at school concurs with the relational aggression coping strategies used by girls in other studies (Remillard & Lamb, 2005). For the girls in the current study, social and emotional support consisted of "receiving and giving love," "ranting and listening," "being on their side" and "always being there" when needed. As Emily explains,

Emily: I don't think it has to be much. I think it's just being there and showing that you care. That's the most important thing for me. Even if it's just sending a text, like, "Hey, how are you doing? Are you all right?" I feel like that's huge, even if you don't talk about whatever the issue is. It's just having someone there. That makes a big difference.

SI 3

It is more desirable to seek social support from camp friends because their separation from the situation means they can talk freely without being accused of talking behind their friends' backs or amplifying whatever drama is going on. Additionally, the girls know that their camp friends will be on their side:

Sara: Also, the difference between I think talking to your school friends about some of the issues that you have and talking to camp friends is more of the idea that you can really say anything to any of your camp friends and they'll always support you. It'll always be like,

"No, you're right." When you talk to people at home there's always ... They have to put their two cents in. It's like, "Yes, but try doing this" or, "Just rub it off your shoulders. It's fine. He or she probably didn't mean it that way." Your camp friends will always be like, "No, you're totally right. They're totally in the wrong." You know what I'm saying? Even if it's not for advice, I personally think camp friends are the best for a pick me up when you really need to feel like someone is on your side 100%, no gain in anything else. I always go to my camp friends for that.

SI 5

Sara gets unconditional support from her camp friends, something her school friends (who presumably have more firsthand knowledge of the situation) cannot offer her. The support may feel objective in some ways because the camp friends don't have a personal stake in the situation; their own social lives are not going to be impacted by the resolution of the conflict. The support is biased though because the camp friend enters the conversation with a pre-established mutual understanding that they will be an unwavering advocate. Sara's statement about being able to talk to her camp friends about anything with their unconditional support relates to a claim frequently made by many of the girls in the study; that they can tell their camp friends anything. The girls explained that this was because at camp there are "no boundaries," and that they get "super personal" with each other. The fact that they are living together creates a feeling of "closeness" and intimacy, where they feel they genuinely "know and understand" one another. The girls also felt they could trust their camp friends more because while at home people changed when they got into high school, their camp friends remained consistent.

The enactment of this social and emotional support begins at camp as the girls become close and disclose emotional problems they have had at school. During her camp interview, Lily spoke about the support she gave her friends and saw her role as someone who uplifts the girls.

Because she was a year younger than everyone else, she felt somewhat on the edge of the group, but she valued the fact she could be there for them and boost them up. Sara had been telling the rest of the cabin about some drama she had gone through at school:

Lily: Because we talk about a lot of drama and stuff and I'm kinda the person that stays on their bunk and reads and tries not to get inv- But ... I always try to interject with something that'll make them feel better because I know that if I can make them feel better then ... They'll radiate that out to other people and younger campers and it'll just make everybody's experience better, so ... I guess, when we were all listening to Sara and I just turn over in the bunk and I go, "Excuse me, but I have something to say. I'm really sorry for interrupting." And I go, "I don't understand why you all are getting this much crap from people at your school because, honestly, you're the nicest, kindest people in the world and I don't understand why people can't see that.

CI 3

In the follow-up Skype interview, Lily explained that she wasn't a particularly open person, and if she had a problem, she wouldn't normally go to a camp friend first. She would go to her parents, who she is very close to. She said that there was nothing about her camp friends that would discourage her from talking to them about issues, but she generally liked to keep things private.

Sara, out of all the girls, felt the most responsibility to provide regular support for her friends during the year:

Sara: I do try to reach out to them at least twice a week. I have a reminder on my phone because I know otherwise I'll forget. The Remind app. Especially because I know the staff is aware of this and stuff like that, that Emily, who is my closest camp friend, went through a really hard time in terms of friends at home last year. I have a reminder on my app like, "Text Emily. Check in" like every day. Every day I'll just

shoot her a text being like, "How was your day today?"

SI 5

Sara knew empathically the support her friends might want and need because she had also experienced relational aggression at school. The supportive relationship she and Emily share goes both ways:

Emily: Yeah, we both have some hard times that can be really stressful, but she's one of the only people I know that really gets it, and I think she feels the same way about me, so we're able to talk about it. If something's going on with her, she can reach out to me, vice versa. That's something really good we have for each other.

SI 6

For girls such as Emily who have experienced relational aggression to such a severe degree that she moved schools, knowing that she had the support of her camp friends was a lifeline. It wasn't just that she knew they were there when she needed them, their existence counter-acted the negative interactions she was having at school and reminded her of her true self:

Emily: I know my camp friends, and I know the kind of people that I go well with. I know what I can do to be a good friend because of them, and with that I also feel comfortable. It's hard to describe, but I feel I always have them, so it's okay to ... Even if you're lonely sometimes, this is kind of off-track, but... if you're lonely sometimes or sometimes you feel like you have no friends, you're like that's not true. I have my camp friends. They really help me to think of the kind of people I want to be around.

SI 3

Drama

The reason that the girls seek social support from their camp friends through the virtual-symbolic camp is that of school-based “drama.” Drama is the terminology used by almost all the girls I interviewed, but in asking the girls to define drama, it was clear they were referring to relational aggression, which includes exclusion, gossiping, fakeness, betraying trust, jealousy, competition over boys, and judgment over appearance.

There was general agreement that there was little to no drama at camp. There had been a few years ago, but the girls who had caused the drama had not come back to camp. The lack of drama at camp was one of the reasons why the girls felt their friendships were so strong and valuable:

Sara: We talked about this before in our group meeting too it's also an unspoken rule that there is no drama at camp. You know what I'm saying? It's hard to pinpoint exactly why. I think it really is because we're one big family. It's a drama-free environment and we talked about the people who do create drama don't come back because they have a hard time fitting in at camp because everyone is one cohesive unit. No one wants the drama. There's no social climbing or anything like that because we're all on the same level. I think that's the best part, all being equal, all being this one big unit.

SI 5

Ophelia: Honestly, because I think we were all just like, we were all, there was drama like years ago and it was our last year at camp, we all, like before we were all just kind of like, we are so done with all of the stupid little things that we would argue about. We are not gonna let our like, last summer as campers be ruined by stupid drama. That definitely played a big part of it, but also I just think we all just, we all just, it's

like we're all sisters and we all have those tiny little fights. But then at the end of the day, it's never anything like that would create drama, ever. Because at the end of the day, we don't want to just ruin the whole camp atmosphere.

SI 4

Emily: Because like the few times that there have been drama at camp that I've seen, like two years ago there were, there was a group of not very nice girls and guys. And they like, it was a whole thing. And um, but I think that that was just because they didn't really care as much about their friends to the same level. So like, I, that didn't affect me because I wasn't friends with them. But um, like, I ha- ... There's so much drama where I live. But um, it doesn't happen here 'cause I think everyone just genuinely, like, cares.

CI 7

The girls perceived that the reasons why camp was a drama-free environment were because there were no cliques; everyone was on the same level, and everyone was friends with everyone, so there was no need for social climbing or fakeness. There was no drama because friends genuinely cared for one another and because everyone agreed to abide by the same set of “unspoken” rules so that the atmosphere at camp would not be ruined.

Although there was an agreement that there were no cliques at camp, most of the girls I interviews recognized that some campers were seen as popular. Camp popularity was different than at school – people were popular at camp because they had “camp spirit,” because they were friendly with everyone, or because they had been there for a long time so knew a lot of people. As the oldest girls in camp, Sara, Emily, Ophelia, Mary, Ashley, and Melissa definitely have this popularity. Lily, who is friends with these girls but not as much a member of their tight-knit group,

describes the popular kids at camp as being the ones in “the center of the mosh-pit” at the end-of-session dance.

The girls also suggested that the reason why there was no drama at camp was that “girls are good to each other.” The girls believe that camp is a place where girls “shine,” where they are more confident, more independent, where they can “go crazy” without being judged, where they take on challenges, and walk around alone without worrying what someone will say. The girls believed that camp was a place where you can “be yourself” or the “best version of yourself,” and that everyone changes when they go to camp. This might suggest that most of the girls felt that the meanness, fakeness, or judging they witnessed from girls at school probably had more to do with the context than the girls themselves. In relation to boy drama, although there were camp crushes, flings, and even love triangles with some of the boys at camp (where two girls liked the same boy), this never got in the way of their friendships:

Sara: It's like totally fine because it's casual. You're there for a month. It's kind of unspoken that it's just like, "Okay ..." The most you're going to do is what? Dance with them at the dance. You know what I'm saying? It's not going anywhere or anything like that. Why not just have fun? It's not a big deal. If it ever is a big ... The most that I think there has ever been drama over boys at camp would be like someone just got slightly hurt because they liked the same guy as someone else and what happened was they just took someone else aside and they're like, "I'm feeling upset" and they were like, "You know what? It's fine. It's camp." You're like, "You're right. I'm going to hang out with my girlfriends and the other boys that I'm friends with."

SI 5

Social media often played a significant role in drama at school. Lily concluded after recounting a story in her interview “social media blows things up.” Sara explained that in “the age of screenshotting,” private conversations could be spread easily and cause drama between friends. A few of the girls thought that the greater honesty and lack of filter that people their age used on social media caused conflict. The girls did offer the absence of social media as one of the factors why there was no drama at camp, but it was not a primary reason for their opinions.

Discussion

The four key themes identified in my findings are deeply interconnected. The girls rely on the connection provided by mobile and computer-mediated communication to manage and maintain the close relationships they develop at Camp Sycamore. These close relationships are highly valued because of their refusal to succumb to the norms of “girl drama” that characterizes their school friendships and social groups. The different dimensions of connection form the infrastructure of the virtual-symbolic camp. Through the virtual-symbolic camp, the girls seek and provide social and emotional support for their camp friends. This support is necessary because of drama at school. The girls turn to their camp friends first in dealing with this drama because they are more supportive and separate from what is going on. The separateness of the virtual-symbolic camp makes it a better environment to seek social and emotional support yet involving it in school drama ultimately muddies those boundaries. The virtual-symbolic camp disrupts the borders between camp life and school/home life.

The discussion is structured in five sections. I first explore *why* the girls need the virtual-symbolic camp; bringing in questions from the literature about girls’ friendships and relational aggression. I then discuss *how* the girls (and others) maintain the virtual-symbolic camp and their relationships, focusing on *polymedia*, *mobile-emotive contexts*, *mobile maintenance expectations*, and *ambient/mediated co-presence*. Next, I conceptualize *what* the virtual-symbolic camp actually

is, and what its significance is for the girls, drawing on theories of *bounded spaces*, *intimate publics*, and *heterotopias*. I then ask: *are* the girls using the virtual-symbolic camp for social and emotional support? Finally, I discuss how the girls' white, middle-class identities are factors in relational aggression, and in the types of emotional and social challenges the girls may face.

Why do the girls need the virtual-symbolic camp?

In this section, I consider what it feels like for the girls *not* to be at camp when they first return home and as the school year progresses. I explore the reasons why the girls need the literal-physical Camp Sycamore, and how this is related to why they need the virtual-symbolic camp. If camp can be an escape from postfeminist girlhood discourses and girl drama/relational aggression, I consider how this might solve issues in girl cultures. I question the significance of parental separation at camp to adolescent identity development, and how the virtual-symbolic camp might continue this break. Finally, I argue that the virtual-symbolic camp can provide an escape for the girls as well as augment the reality of their daily lives.

When the girls return home from camp, they all feel 'camp sick' for a short while. In multiple interviews, the girls explained that when they first arrive home, they miss camp and their camp friends. They're excited to see their family and school friends, but all they want to do is talk about camp. Returning home from camp doesn't necessarily mean the end of the summer – some go on family vacations, some to other camps – but leaving Camp Sycamore means leaving a place where the girls shared strong emotional connections and felt a sense of self that was specific and possibly unique to that space. The girls report that they use their phones less after returning from camp (after the initial sorting of notifications that have accumulated during their absence). They feel slightly distant from their school friends, wanting to talk about their camp experiences and friends and realizing that their school friends aren't really that interested, and just don't get it anyway. When I spoke to the girls in January, six months after they had returned home from camp,

they were fully in the routine of school and home life, but they still committed significant mental and emotional energy to thinking about camp and their camp friends. All the girls said they thought about camp at least once a day. When they texted or FaceTimed each other, a portion of the conversation was always dedicated to talking about camp or trying to plan an in-person visit. The girls seemed to expend energy in *waiting* for camp to begin again.

The reasons why the girls need the virtual-symbolic camp are related to the reasons the girls return to the literal-physical camp each summer. Camp Sycamore is a place where children and adolescents can escape the pressures of school, peers, social media, and parents. The girls all agreed that at camp you could be your true self or the best version of yourself. This provides a motive for constructing and maintaining the virtual-symbolic camp; they can live or perform that identity year-round even. Sara and Lily spoke about how the freedom and permission to be yourself at camp was particularly important for girls. They felt that girls could be more confident, independent and less inhibited at camp. They had noticed that outside of camp there were societal norms that pressured girls to act or not act a certain way. Camp Sycamore, in contrast, was a space where girls were liberated.

The ‘true’ or ‘best’ self of Camp Sycamore is not the same as the idealized, performative self that girls are told they must strive towards by advertising and celebrity culture. The postfeminist push towards female self-improvement and creating a branded self on social media (Banet-Weiser, 2011) is not necessary at the literal-physical camp. The ‘true’ or ‘best’ self the girls are referring to is a departure from the layers of fakeness and self-presentation that are required to maintain idealized feminine identities in the real world. Camp might also, therefore, be an escape from postfeminist girlhood. According to Ringrose (2012), there are three postfeminist discourses that dominate public discussion about girlhood: the mean girl, the sexy/sexualized girl, and the successful girl. These discourses are not prominent at camp: ‘the mean girl’ discourse is

uncommon because there is little to no drama; the ‘successful girl’ discourse is dampened because other than some fun competition in games there is not a lot of pressure to be highly academic or sporty; and the ‘sexy/sexualized’ discourse is inconspicuous because the girls report that clothing and appearance is far less important at camp than it is at home. These three discourses aren’t completely invisible, but they are not norms. Sometimes a girl (more often a younger child) might display mean behavior to another girl, but this is the exception, not the rule. Successes within programming (e.g., catching a fish, jumping off the high dive, singing a song at the talent show) or within the community (e.g., being kind or helpful to another camper) are celebrated, but they are low-stakes. There are times when a female camper may wish to wear a particularly sexy, revealing outfit to dinner and her counselors may take the opportunity to speak with the camper about choosing a different option. This would be an extreme case though, and most of the time campers are encouraged to express themselves however they wish. Does the virtual-symbolic camp also provide an escape, or an alternative, to postfeminist girlhood? In the sense that it provides a link to the girls’ identities and experiences from the literal-physical camp, yes. Whilst in their daily lives at school it is difficult to live in opposition to the postfeminist girlhood discourses, the virtual-symbolic camp reminds them that there are other ways of performing the self and relating to others.

If Camp Sycamore is an escape from the postfeminist discourse of mean girls, what can this teach us about relational aggression in other contexts? It certainly supports the argument that relational aggression is not a developmental phase (L. M. Brown, 2003) and that girls’ natural meanness is a fallacy (Ringrose, 2006). Relational aggression is a product of a sexist society which undervalues girls and women and tells them that obtaining approval from boys and men should be their ultimate goal. The girls treat camp as a “laboratory for imagining and cobbling together alternative construals about how life has appeared and how legitimately it could be better shaped not merely in small modifications of normativity” (Berlant & Prosser, 2011, p. 182). Without

explicitly pre-conceiving the “unspoken agreement” of girl behavior at camp, the girls co-construct an alternative space where the tactics required to live as a girl in sexist society are not necessary. The discursive construction of girls as mean and catty is diminished at Camp Sycamore, and instead there is a counter-construction that girls “shine” and are “good to each other.” This may suggest that resolving relational aggression amongst girls may require countering the widespread assumptions that girls are mean, convincing parents, teenagers, and teachers that this is not an irrefutable fact of girls’ relational worlds. It is also important to consider the roles of the camp counselors. They have a responsibility to notice any potential conflict in the cabin, facilitate friendships, and make sure everyone is included and accepted. Unlike the teachers in some of the previously cited studies (Merten, 1997; Ringrose, 2008), the camp counselors take on the emotional labor of helping the girls to resolve minor conflicts before they become a problem or behavioral norm in the larger social group. Camp provides a very particular environment where young adult mentors are able to monitor adolescent relationships closely throughout the day, so it’s challenging to imagine how this might be used in school situations. It does give weight to proposals that teacher should intervene more in relational aggression, just as they might do in instances of physical bullying.

An additional factor to consider is the absence of parents at camp. Adolescence is a time where the loosening of ties between children and parents is crucial for identity development. It is possible that one of the reasons the girls felt more able to be their ‘true’ or ‘best’ selves is because they were allowed a real break from their parents. Perhaps the increased independence and confidence the girls felt was related to parental separation. Adolescents might be more tethered to their parents because they are constantly connected via their mobile devices (Turkle, 2011). This could hinder the necessary loosening of ties that adolescents must go through as part of normative development. At camp, the only communication the adolescents can have with their parents is by

writing letters. At home, while a mobile device can increase contact with the parents, it can also provide a break. A mobile device allows adolescents to leave home when they are at home. Adolescents can be sitting in the living room with their parents but immersed in the social world of their friendships. The virtual-symbolic camp may also provide a continuation of the parental-separation that the girls experienced over the summer.

The virtual-symbolic camp allows the girls to escape from the negative or challenging parts of school and home life, such as emotional and social ‘drama’ among peers, without the spatial and temporal constraints of the literal-physical camp. The virtual-symbolic camp can *augment* the girls’ day-to-day realities, whether the girls are walking down the hallways at school or sitting in the car with their parents. If ‘drama’ happens within the girls’ peer groups, they can escape to the virtual-symbolic camp. They can utilize the connections to *augment* their emotional and social reality by receiving unconditional support and love from their camp friends. If school-based social dynamics have made them feel lonely, disliked, or judged, the virtual-symbolic camp can remind them that the school social norms do not define them. In an era where adolescents’ perceived popularity on social media is important, the boost of likes and comments provided by the virtual-symbolic camp community can be a big help.

How is the virtual-symbolic camp space maintained?

Having argued *why* the girls desire the virtual-symbolic camp, in this next section I explore *how* the girls construct and maintain the space. The infrastructure of the virtual-symbolic camp is made up of relational connections that exist on various digital platforms. The girls’ use of multiple media platforms can be conceptualized through the theory of *polymedia*. I argue that the virtual-symbolic camp is maintained through *mobile-emotive contexts*; emotion is a necessary condition for the existence of the space. I question whether the girls must abide by certain *mobile maintenance expectations* within their camp friendships, and explore how *ambient co-presence*

may reduce these expectations. Finally, I consider the girls' emotions toward their mobile devices and how these passive connections play a role in the virtual-symbolic camp.

Polymedia

The girls maintain their camp relationships, and thus the virtual-symbolic camp space, using *polymedia*. Considering the girls often refer to the camp community as a family, it is perhaps not surprising that the theories developed by Madianou and Miller (2013) to explain long-distance mediated relationship maintenance between family members are helpful in this current study. The girls use a variety of media to maintain their friendship connections; mostly texting, FaceTiming, group chats, Instagram, and Snapchat. There is emotional intent involved in a choice to communicate. If they want to recreate the happy, jovial, group atmosphere, they send a photo, video or funny meme to a group chat. If they are upset or angry and need support, they send a text or set up a FaceTime. If they feel longing or nostalgia for the physical connection, they can send an "I miss you" message. If they want to boost a friend's confidence, they 'like' or comment on their Instagram post. If they want to communicate publicly that someone is their best friend, they write a whole post about that person on their birthday. The fact that all the ways that these girls communicate with other frequently invoke strong emotion provides the space for intimate co-presence (Cumiskey & Hjorth, 2017). The girls can feel, as Sara said, that their friends are "right there next to you" because of mobile-emotive communication.

The choice of platform is also constitutive of the relationship; Sara and Emily's regular 8pm FaceTime appointments makes the girls responsible to each other and sets the precedent that they will support each other and disclose emotional information to each other. Writing a long, detailed Instagram birthday post about someone communicates to peer groups the strength of that relationship. Polymedia and choice of platform also define the weaker ties that form the infrastructure of the virtual-symbolic camp. The girls have lots of camp friends who they are not as

close to, but they still maintain connections with them by liking Instagram posts, sending Snapchats, and participating in group chats. They don't have to be actively interacting with each other; the girls' repeated claim that they know their camp friends are 'always there' is reinforced by ambient co-presence. There is constant peripheral awareness of each other's lives on social media. The virtual-symbolic camp is an *ambient community* which "enhances users' sense of belonging by immersing them into emotional and moral spaces" (Madianou, 2016, p. 198). Because this generation is 'always on,' everyone in the virtual-symbolic camp has a peripheral awareness of everyone else through watching their Snapchat or Instagram stories or looking at their photos.

Mobile-emotive contexts

The girls are constantly impacted by their camp friends through the virtual-symbolic camp because of the intense emotional connections. The girls maintain that they can be their true selves at camp and with these friends. Their camp relationships have changed their outlook about the sorts of people they want to be friends with at school. Camp has also altered how they treat their friends and peers. The virtual-symbolic camp is an "intensely emotional and affective augmented reality that is ever-present" (Cumiskey & Hjorth, 2017, p. 26). Rather than the girls' experiences at camp and self-discovery being left behind in summer memories, they are ever-present in the girls' devices and in their minds. Is this disruptive? It certainly has disrupted some of the girls' relationships at schools, but it seems that this has been positive. Emily asserts that it was the ever-presence of her camp friends that allowed her to believe that she deserved more than what she was experiencing at school, and ultimately had the courage to move schools. Sara's positive experiences with platonic male friends at camp has urged her to maintain similar friendships with boys at school while resisting the judgment of peers that there has to be something more going on.

Melissa intentionally drifted away from school friends whom she felt were bad influences after her camp friendships taught her what was important.

The emotional lifts or dips that the girls feel when connecting with their friends via the virtual-symbolic camp support the conceptualization of “collective bursts of affect” on Snapchat (Velez, 2014, para. 2). As the girls (and other children/teenagers/adults) who engage with the virtual-symbolic camp through any of its dimensions experience an emotional connection from a text, FaceTime, Instagram like or Snapchat, these collective bursts of affect reinforce its structure. The virtual-symbolic camp is not just built on communication; it is built on affective communication. Just as the literal-physical camp is not just built on children spending time together, it is built on emotional connections formed to each other.

Mobile Maintenance Expectations and Ambient Co-presence

I would argue that the way these girls use mobile and computer-mediated communication to manage their camp friendships is different from how the children and adolescents do so in previous studies focusing on school friendships. A UK study found that children used mobile phones to positively maintain and manage relationships to ensure that they were not socially isolated, but that they also offered more opportunities for negative friendship behaviors such as bullying (Bond, 2010). It was more like a task, something they had to do otherwise they felt excluded from the social network. Mobile and computer-mediated communication are vital in the management and maintenance of the girls’ camp friendships because most of them live far away from each other, but there isn’t such a fear of becoming isolated from social groups or activities.

Whilst there is generally a consensus amongst the girls that their camp friends will always be there when needed, they don’t seem to have high *mobile maintenance expectations* (Hall & Baym, 2012). There was an understanding that everyone was busy with school and that even though sometimes you might not speak for a few weeks, this didn’t mean you were a bad friend,

and the next time you spoke it would be like “no time had gone by.” The ambient co-presence created by the virtual-symbolic camp allows the girls to feel secure that their camp friends are always there without pressure to text or call every day. It wasn’t as if there was no contact at all, because they were still able to like each other’s posts or view their Snapchat stories. Hall and Baym found that when friends texted and called each other a lot, their expectation that that friend would be constantly responsive and available on mobile increased (2012). It seems that ambient co-presence in relationships might decrease mobile maintenance expectations because friends can feel a remote connection without having to communicate with each other actively. Turkle would argue that these latter ambient connections are not as meaningful as intimate, direct connection (2011). When Mary spoke of scrolling through her camp photos, and Lily told me about looking at the old Instagram chats she keeps open, they both felt happiness in doing so. They expressed that the happiness came from thinking about their friends, but if the feeling of connection ends with the device, as opposed to being transmitted to another person, is the connection with the person or the device? And is there actually something lonely and isolating about connecting with the content of the device instead of the person?

Emotion and the device

Although mobile phones are promoted as devices aimed at communication and connection with others, no one can deny the isolating and intimate aspects of these devices. As constant companions, mobile devices can become our *sole* (and most desired) companions”

(Cumiskey & Hjorth, 2017, p. 37)

Although Cumiskey and Hjorth’s work looks at people dealing with grief and loss and trying to connect to someone who is no longer a/live⁴, this intimacy and connection with the device is not

⁴ When people die, they are no longer alive, but online or mobile versions of themselves may still exist (e.g. Facebook profiles, voicemails, text messages). These online/media versions exist, but they are no longer *live*.

exclusive to grieving individuals. People experience emotion toward their mobile phone as well as to the people they communicate with (Fortunati & Taipale, 2012). The girls describe the emotions they feel at Camp Sycamore as “the opposite of loneliness.” Is this feeling also present in the virtual-symbolic camp? If someone believes that they are feeling a connection with someone because they are looking at photos or old text messages, or because they are passively viewing that person’s Instagram or Snapchat stories without interacting, that person might build up an idea of connection in their head which is not reciprocated. They might then arrive at the literal-physical camp and think their friendship is more than it is.

Often the emotional connection sought from camp friends related to acknowledgment and reciprocity of missing the friend. Many of the girls’ social media interactions or conversations began with “I miss you,” or consisted only of that phrase. There was happiness in the connection but also sadness and perhaps loneliness because the friends hadn’t seen each other for a while. The girls frequently spoke of the comfort they felt knowing they could reach out and connect to their friends at any time. However there was acknowledgment in each interaction through voicing “I miss you” that they were missing some aspect of the connection. There is something strikingly different about these girls’ relationships than most other friendships; it involves a temporal and spatial component that is completely void of mobile and computer-mediated communication. Perhaps the girls are not just missing their friends, but they are also missing the *un*-mediated connection in the literal-physical camp.

There is tension between the claim that their camp friends are “always there” and the admission that they miss their friends. What does this tell us about how the girls perceive the connections they maintain with their camp friends through the virtual-symbolic camp? It can be helpful to think about how grieving people maintain connection with their lost loved ones via social and mobile media:

The illusive feeling of connectedness fostered by frequent and, at times, superficial interaction via social and mobile media could be experienced like a haunting, a sense of presence that never truly materializes – the definition of co-presence. Creating and maintaining a virtual presence as something that transcends physical reality can help to ensure an escape from the limitations of our physical bodies, as well as a means through which we can guarantee we will never be forgotten (Cumiskey & Hjorth, 2017, p. 38).

Is the frequent yet immaterial connection the girls maintain with their camp friends somewhat ghostly? In the virtual-symbolic camp, the girls' virtual connections with their friends are ever present, "always there," yet never materializing. The girls may even experience a haunting feeling: they feel their friends' physical absences more intensely because they feel their constant virtual presence. The absence and longing of their friends overwhelm the mediated presence and interrupt the benefits of the connections. There is certainly evidence of this: during their Skype interviews, the girls told me that they frequently tell their camp friends "I miss you" when they speak or interact online. Longing and missing each other is a significant component of their year-round relationships. In long-distance relationships of migrants and their families, this constant presence can become burdensome even when it is supposed to be helpful (Madianou, 2016).

What is the virtual-symbolic camp and does it actually exist?

I have thus far discussed why the girls need the virtual-symbolic camp, and how they maintain this space. The question remains whether the virtual-symbolic camp is actually real? And, if it is, what is it? I argue that the virtual-symbolic camp does exist as an entity by framing it within existing theories of bounded spaces, bedroom culture, intimate publics, and heterotopias. My objective in this section is not to definitively conclude which of these theories fits best but to offer multiple conceptualizations of the virtual-symbolic space.

Bounded Spaces and Bedroom Culture

Camp Sycamore is, as the girls frequently state, a “bubble;” a bounded space wherein girls can all agree to live by different rules from those which society expects or demands. The limitations and boundedness of time and space at Camp Sycamore (both the literal-physical and the virtual-symbolic) give way to a sense of limitless and freedom. The condensed time that the girls spend together at camp encourages them to treat each other in positive ways because they don’t want to waste or ruin the time they have. It allows them to let go of squabbles which might otherwise have turned into larger conflicts. The boundaries of the physical space give them the freedom to be or act like their true selves as they are separate from the pressures of their school social structures and real-world responsibilities. Bedroom culture theory supports the argument that bounded spaces can be free spaces for girls. Within the bounded space of the bedroom, girls do identity work, produce creative content, and reinforce the cultural resources that are female friendships (Kearney, 2013; McRobbie & Garber, 1976). The bounded space of the bedroom has entry and exit points; it is a safe space where girls do not experience the sexism that they face in school or in the street. The cabins in which the girls live for 2-8 weeks of the summer are sites of bedroom culture, as is the ‘Girls’ Row’ (the cluster of girls’ cabins which is off-limits to boys).

The virtual-symbolic camp is also bounded; each dimension has entry and exit points. A group chat consisting of only the girls from their cabin is a bounded space, as is an intimate FaceTime conversation, or the archive of messages sent back and forth between camp friends. If the literal-physical camp or the virtual-symbolic camp were accessible to the rest of the girls’ peers and family, they would not be such safe spaces. If the literal-physical camp did not happen in a limited timeframe, it would become too much like everyday reality and would lose the safety in its boundedness. Amongst all the anxiety, apprehension and threat from the real world, the girls can make a retreat to the literal-physical camp over the summer, and to the virtual-symbolic camp

during the rest of the year. For this retreat to be possible, there must be borders; entry and exit points which limit who can visit the bubble. The spaces of retreat must be controlled environments. The real world is too chaotic and limitless; the boundlessness is threatening. The bounded limits of bubbles like camp create safety. The girls become comfortable floating between the actual realities and virtual realities and this *floating between* is made possible by the *augmented reality* of the virtual-symbolic camp.

Intimate publics

The bounded spaces of the literal-physical camp and the virtual-symbolic camp can also be conceptualized as *intimate publics* as originally theorized by Lauren Berlant and reframed by Emma Velez in her work on social media:

In her book *The Female Complaint*, Lauren Berlant claims, “Publics presume intimacy.” What generates this intimacy, for Berlant, is a shared worldview and “emotional knowledge” that stems from a shared history. The intimate public is further characterized by the “porous, affective sense of identification” it affords its members. Intimate publics are structured to affirm and confirm a promise of belongingness and inclusion. The intimate public flourishes by circulating “an already felt need; by generating a sense of emotional continuity amongst its members.” Berlant asserts that it is the intimate public’s ability to capitalize on this already felt need for belonging and provide its members with a simple feeling of “rich continuity with a vaguely defined set of others” that enables the intimate public to act as an “affective magnet.” Intimate publics survive and thrive off a shared central fantasy of being able to transcend one’s particular situation and to join the generalizable community. Berlant writes, “The concept of the ‘intimate public’ thus carries with it the fortitude of common sense or a vernacular sense of belonging to a community, with all the undefinedness that implies.” (Velez, 2014, para. 17)

Camp Sycamore capitalizes on children and adolescents' "need for belonging" by providing a space where everyone is accepted and included. These values may be promoted by the camp counselors and administration, but they are reinforced by the campers themselves through their behaviors towards each other. 90% of the staff are former campers who keep coming back to work at the camp because they also feel a sense of belonging and inclusion; it is clearly an "affective magnet" for the young adults as well. The community thrives because the campers and staff share a "central fantasy" that at camp, they can be their true selves; they can transcend preconceptions from school, home, and work. As the literal-physical space undergoes the transformation to the virtual-symbolic, it remains a space where the campers dip into that sense of belonging and inclusion whenever they need. It is easily accessible; it requires only a text, comment, a scroll through photos, or a Snapchat.

Heterotopias

Camp Sycamore can also be conceptualized as a heterotopia (Foucault & Miskowiec, 1986), which is an *other space*; occurring in "folds within the normative world where one can encounter the positivity of being otherwise" (Berlant & Prosser, 2011, p. 181). Camp Sycamore disrupts the temporal and spatial continuity of everyday life. Online spaces are also heterotopias "in which people are hammering out how to live as anomalous to a projected-out norm" (Berlant & Prosser, 2011, p. 181). Both at the literal-physical camp and in the virtual-symbolic camp, teenage girls are living anomalously to the projected-out norm of the 'mean girl.' The virtual-symbolic camp is a space which floats between the real world and the virtual world, and this *space between* is a heterotopia just as a boat is: "a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea" (Foucault & Miskowiec, 1986, p. 27). The boundedness of the literal-physical and virtual-symbolic Camp Sycamore also constitutes the heterotopia: "Heterotopias always presuppose a system of

opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable. In general, the heterotopic site is not freely accessible like a public place” (1986, p. 26). Perhaps most importantly in the context of this research, Foucault’s third principle of heterotopias states that “the heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” (1986, p. 25). The virtual-symbolic camp juxtaposes the camp space with school and family spaces, as well as broader social spaces. Dimensions of the virtual-camp space such as a text message chain or an Instagram post are adjacent to text messages with school friends, family photos, and celebrity posts that the individual may follow on social media. The literal-physical camp juxtaposes the innocence of a child and play-focused space with the work-space of the young adults who staff the camp. Camp is at once a place *outside* of family, as parents are left behind, but also one of *family* as a cohesive unit is formed within each cabin and across the community. The school and the online world are highlighted by their absence, as campers tell their friends about their lives at home.

There is tension in the borders between the literal-physical camp and the virtual-symbolic camp, which supports Jurgenson’s theory of augmented reality (2011). Even in the supposedly offline space of camp in which the lack of phones is approved of and even celebrated, mobile devices and social media disrupt these borders in different ways: when someone poses for a photo during camp knowing that they are doing so to post it on Instagram; when at the end of a session the girls go around collecting each other’s phone numbers, and Snapchat handles; when their parents bring their phones on pick-up day, and the girls start snapping photos with their friends. Social media and mobile communication transform the literal-physical camp alchemically into a virtual-symbolic camp that augments the reality of the girls’ daily lives; it is “always right there,” so they can “connect back to those feelings.”

What is the meaning of the heterotopia in relation to everywhere else? Foucault writes:

The last trait of heterotopias is that they have a function in relation to all the space that remains. This function unfolds between two extreme poles. Either their role is to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory (perhaps that is the role that was played by those famous brothels of which we are now deprived). Or else, on the contrary, their role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled. This latter type would be the heterotopia, not of illusion, but of compensation (1986, p. 27).

The latter function seems to fit more with my conceptualization of the literal-physical and virtual-symbolic camp. Camp space is as safe, bounded, and idyllic as real space is dangerous, limitless and full of conflict. It is constructed in opposition to that which can make real life chaotic. But I also believe that camp space fits the former function as well. Camp space creates a space of illusion; the girls know that what happens in the camp space is not real life, and the “true selves” they can inhabit are perhaps not tangible outside of the camp space (literal-physical or virtual-symbolic). At the same time, the fact that the girls perceive their camp selves as true or real exposes their real-life selves as fake or illusory.

Recently, a new dimension of the virtual-symbolic camp has arisen, as Camp Sycamore now has an official Instagram account. I took on the role of website/social media manager for the camp in January as the directors were looking for new ways to market to parents and children to improve enrollment. The official Camp Sycamore Instagram account posts photos each week which are curated to invoke a positive emotional connection with followers. The marketing strategy that the other directors and myself are using is a commodification of the emotional connections both children and adults feel to the camp.

Are the girls using the virtual-symbolic camp as a way of accessing social and emotional support?

The girls are using the virtual-symbolic camp space to access social and emotional support in different ways, with varying levels of frequency and intensity. Some of the girls seek emotional and social support from each other in relation to school issues while they are at the literal-physical camp. The close relationships the girls have at camp allow for greater self-disclosure. They sit in the cabins at night and share personal stories about their lives and friends at home. Lily's story demonstrates this: when Sara and others were telling their cabin about the hard times they had had at school, Lily offered supportive words about how awesome they were and how she couldn't believe that the people at school couldn't see that. The continued connection and contact with the virtual-symbolic camp is always available, even if they don't always need it. It offers a way to access the emotional and social support that their friends gave them while at camp.

One of the ways the girls use it is to remind themselves of the positive evaluations of self that were invoked at camp. The virtual-symbolic camp reminds them that they are worthwhile, that they have good friends, and that the status-quo at school does not have to be the norm. Emily could draw upon the virtual-symbolic camp when she felt lonely and remind herself that she was worthwhile because of her friends at camp. The girls could also experience an emotional boost from a passive awareness of their friends by viewing their social media profiles. Emily and Mary both found that seeing their friends' daily lives on their Instagram feeds, and knowing they were happy, made them feel happy. Interaction and connection seems to happen without active interaction and connection.

Turkle found that young people would begin to feel an emotion and immediately need to communicate it and receive validation for having it: "emotions are not fully experienced until they are communicated" (2011, p. 175). My findings support this argument as the girls in the current

study certainly called upon their camp friends to talk through and process their emotions. In Turkle's study, the youth reported that they would send the call for support out to multiple friends, waiting for someone to respond. The girls in my study are more directed, knowing in advance that if they need advice or support, they will turn to their camp friends first. Some of them have regular times set up to Facetime, while others send an "I need to rant" text out, which leads to a longer connection via FaceTime. The virtual-symbolic camp provides an emotional outlet, without the risk of telling a friend at school who could be somewhat involved in the situation. As Sara pointed out, it can be hard to trust people at school because they might screenshot a text you send someone and this can be spread and misconstrued. For the girls, they don't have such trust issues with their camp friends. Lily made it clear that she did not use the virtual-symbolic camp to deal with issues that happened at school. She wasn't usually involved with a lot of drama in her peer group, but she said that if she did ever have a problem, she would go to her parents first. Lily explained that this was because she wasn't very open with her friends. She did trust her camp friends though, and she thought that there might be instances where she would ask them for advice if for some reason she couldn't talk to her parents about it. The rest of the girls all agreed that it was much easier to talk to their camp friends about friend drama at school because they were separate and unconditionally supportive.

I do not assume that this is completely positive for the girls. I wonder whether having the safety net of the virtual-symbolic camp allows the girls to let negative experiences at school go unresolved. Does it provide an intervention to the culture of relational aggression between girls which is caused by sexist society, or does it allow an escape which doesn't have any impact on that culture? When Emily and Sara went through emotional stress related to peer relationships, knowing that they had good friends at camp, who accepted them for who they were, gave them the confidence to extract themselves from toxic friend situations at school and believe that they were

worthy of good friendships. They were able to solve the problem for themselves, but I wonder whether their reactions had any impact on the wider issues of relational aggression in their school networks. Some people use social media and virtual communities to escape what is happening to them in the immediate. They don't have to see or hear what they don't like because they can immerse themselves in their device instead. This could be framed as emotional support, or self-care, because it might help your sense of well-being. Is this retreat or escape positive if it solely benefits an individual, or is it important for people to have more of a responsibility to a larger community? In this instance, the community of adolescent girls at school. Do the girls become less invested in that community because they don't need them; they have their camp friends? Is there even a lack of empathy towards their physical neighbors/community members, because they are emotionally disconnected? I think the girls would argue that their camp relationships in general make them more empathetic towards people at school and at home. A few of the girls expressed that camp had taught them to be more helpful, more inclusive, and more aware of other people's feelings and needs. It could actually be that the virtual-symbolic camp tops up this empathetic resource and acts as a daily reminder to be empathetic to those at school and in their communities.

White and Middle-Class

The emotional and social challenges the girls experience at school are tied to their racial identities and socio-economic status (SES). The social and material privileges afforded to them as white, middle-class girls living in suburban towns with good school districts are factors in the types of emotional difficulties or relational issues the girls may go through. While turmoil in friendship groups can have severe and lasting effects on the girls' emotional, psychological, and physical well-being, they do not have to deal with the same issues that girls of color or low SES do. The girls told me that they went to "really good schools" in towns where everyone was obsessed with getting into a good college. They explained that the pressure of these environments sometimes

caused them stress and anxiety. This type of pressure can have real emotional and psychosocial impact on adolescents (Luthar, 2003) and should not be minimized. However, they are different from the kinds of stressors that girls of color and girls living in poverty experience. They did not have to deal with the type of stress that comes from living in a poor, urban area, or going to an under-resourced school (Ewart & Suchday, 2002). They did not have to deal with the mental, emotional, and behavioral health impacts of family poverty (Yoshikawa, Aber, & Beardslee, 2012). They do not experience the emotional effects of being in an environment where people have low-expectations for your future success, such as less emotional support from teachers, which is sometimes the case for African American students (Cooper, 1979). As white girls, they did not have to experience racial discrimination and micro-aggressions that Black, Latina and Asian girls face (Chavous, Rivas-Drake, Smalls, Griffin, & Cogburn, 2008; Rosenbloom & Way, 2004). It was beyond the scope of this study to obtain information about all emotional issues the girls may have faced, but it is important to recognize that just by being white and middle-class, they are free from so many of the emotional and social challenges facing girls who don't share their privilege.

Drama, or relational aggression, also needs to be understood in the context of race and class. Relational aggression has been viewed as a problem among white girls, whilst Black and Latina girls have been accused of being more physically aggressive (Waldron, 2011). Black girls experience higher levels of discipline and exclusion for displaying similar relationally aggressive behaviors as white girls (Blake, Butler, Lewis, & Darensbourg, 2011). Teachers frequently ignore relational aggression among white, middle-class girls and leave it for the girls themselves to resolve (Ringrose, 2008). The girls in this study, who have experienced varying levels of relational aggression in their friendships and peer groups, would likely not have been at risk of exclusionary discipline practices or criminalization. This may have consequences for the way the girls perceive girl drama in their social groups.

Limitations

Whilst I generally view my reflexive insider knowledge of Camp Sycamore as a benefit and useful tool of analysis, it is also a limitation of the study. There are reasons why the girls might have wanted to impress or please me in their interviews. All the 15-year-old girls were about to apply for Sycamore's competitive counselor-in-training program, and they may have wanted to convince me of their commitment and love for camp so that I would recommend them to the Camp Director. Additionally, I might not have heard counter-narratives about camp because the girls who agreed to participate in the study may have been self-selecting in that they were already campers who felt a strong emotional connection between friendship and Camp Sycamore.

As mentioned previously, the racial and perceived socio-economic homogeneity of the sample is a limitation of the study. Future research might involve a comparative component with a more diverse camp to understand how the role of mobile and computer-mediated communication in different girls' friendships is altered by cultural contexts.

A third limitation of this study is that I did not carry out content analysis of the girls' social media profiles, as it was beyond the scope of this project as an MA thesis. A digital ethnography of the girls mediated relationships would be an excellent opportunity for future research, to triangulate the perceptions of the girls in their interviews and focus groups.

Conclusion

The objective of this research study was to carry out an in-depth exploration into the role of mobile and computer-mediated communication in the friendships of girls who anchor the strength and closeness of their relationships in a technology-free environment. The girls used mobile and computer-mediated communication to construct a virtual-symbolic camp that mirrored the literal-physical camp space. Camp Sycamore represents a safe, liberatory space because of its boundedness. It is a space where girls can escape the 'drama,' fakeness, and meanness that affects

their school friendships. Rather than Camp Sycamore remaining a temporally and spatially isolated component of their lives, one they could only return to once a year, the girls use technology to create a space that can augment their every-day realities. The infrastructure of the virtual-symbolic camp relies on the emotional connections and collective bursts of affect that the girls experience through various dimensions. It is ever-present so that the girls can access emotional or social support from their friends. The ambient community also provides emotional and social support; sometimes the girls just need to be reminded of who they were able to be whilst at Camp Sycamore, and a peripheral awareness of their friends' lives is sufficient.

The liberatory space of the literal-symbolic camp allows the girls to be their 'true' or 'best' selves. The girls wish that they could be that version of themselves everywhere, but it's not always easy at school and home. The virtual-symbolic camp allows the girls to keep spending time with their camp friends, who do see that 'true' or 'best' version. The virtual-symbolic camp provides authentic, but inorganic, experiences that are tied to the grounded experiences of the literal-physical camp. For the girls, the virtual-symbolic camp experiences can be as authentic and real as those at camp, but the existence of the literal-physical camp is a necessary condition of this authenticity. The virtual-symbolic camp may not seem like a real-life intervention in the girls' lives, because it is virtual, but it does have real-life implications for the girls' social and emotional well-being.

The findings of this study help researchers understand one of the many different ways teenage girls use social media and mobile communication in their friendships. Importantly, it does so in a way which does not focus solely on risk behaviors or potential harm. It is impossible to describe the whole picture of teenage social media use if research only focuses on the apparent problems and dangers, such as cyberbullying or sexting (seen as a risky behavior by many although this is arguable). By listening to what was important to this group of teenage girls, I found that the

role of social media and mobile communication was inextricable from the nature of the connection they felt with the friends they used it with. Researchers cannot make assumptions about teenagers' social media and technology use by studying school friendships and peer groups only. The virtual-symbolic camp co-constructed by the girls provided a vastly different way of using social media and technology than their social relations at school did. The girls shared the opinion that the technology-free environment of Camp Sycamore was one of the necessary factors of the closeness of their camp friendships. The absence of distractions, the constant face-to-face interactions, and the freedom from having to act or look a certain way on social media, all were vital to the strength of these connections. As Jurgenson points out, it is not helpful to view the relationship between the online and offline as a zero-sum situation where time spent online takes away from time spend offline and vice versa (2011). There is something important about creating technology-free environments, but that doesn't mean that technology cannot enhance or support those experiences. The girls' bonds with each other are created because of a technology-free environment, but they use technology to build on what they created and maintain those meaningful bonds of friendship.

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