

Cultivating social media safety awareness in middle school girls

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Abstract

Australian middle school girls are some of the heaviest users of social media in this country. They use it extensively to communicate with friends both in and out of school and, not surprisingly, most say they could not live without it. Despite these claims, girls aged 12 to 14 experience higher levels of online trouble such as cyberbullying and sexting than same age boys. These troubles make them more prone to emotional distress such as depression and anxiety. To date, intervention initiatives have not been overly effective in reducing these problems. This paper reports on the online practices employed by middle school girls to negotiate social media. The data is drawn from an ongoing study involving 75 middle school girls from two high schools in Queensland. Preliminary findings drawn from survey and focus group contributions show that middle school girls can easily describe online safety protocols but their interpretation and translation of protocols into effective social media practices often differs from recommended guidelines when communicating with friends. Strategies for cultivating social media safety awareness in middle school girls are offered.

Introduction

Cyberbullying, sexting and image-based troubles impact on girls' everyday experience in and out of school and have potential to interrupt individual learning and personal wellbeing (Spears, 2016). Middle school girls are more likely than any other demographic to experience online challenges, especially cyberbullying (bullyingnoway.gov.au, 2017), and are particularly prone to stress, anxiety, and depression in relation to these encounters (Alexander & Krans, 2016; Rigby & Johnson, 2016). Social media and friendship are central to these experiences (Thompson, 2018). Therefore, a robust model for understanding girls' friendship experiences with social media can inform online safety policy, wellbeing agendas, awareness-raising programs, and self-help mechanisms for this age group.

This paper shares data from an ongoing project that focuses specifically on middle school girls, social media, and friendship. The project investigates girls' online practices and

strategies with friends, friendship expectations and norms associated with social media, and friendship difficulties experienced in online contexts. The overall aim of the project is to challenge generic online safety measures to include more explicit strategies and awareness raising dialogues for middle school girls and their friends. At the more comprehensive level, the research contributes to current debates concerned with gendered online practices (Thompson, 2016a), gendered norms and sexism (Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, & Livingstone, 2013), and aggression and violence towards girls and young women (Plan International Australia/Our Watch, 2016).

Middle School Girls, Social Media and Friends

Australian middle school girls are some of the heaviest users of social media in the country (Australian Communications and Media Authority [ACMA] (2015). Communicating with friends via social media is integral to their daily lives both in and out of school. They text friends regularly, check friends' posting frequently, update profile pictures, and engage extensively with visually-oriented platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat (Lenhart, Duggan, Perrin, Stepler, Rainie, & Parker, 2015). Not surprisingly, most of them say they can not live without social media. "It's a fun way to keep in touch", "organise events", and "find out what's going on with friends" (Thompson, 2016a).

Despite positive claims about the value of social media for friendship, girls aged 12 to 14 report higher levels of bullying (Rigby & Johnson, 2016), and are more likely to feel pressured to produce nude images than same age boys (Cooper, Quayle, Jonsson, & Svedun, 2016). They are more likely to report being sad, frightened, and upset after being bullied and feel much less safe from bullying at school, on the way to and from school, and online than boys. The emotional effects of bullying, especially covert forms such as cyberbullying, are greater for girls than boys (Rigby & Johnson, 2016). Forms of emotional distress include depression, anxiety, self-harm, and in extreme instances, suicide ideation. Adolescent girls, especially those in middle school, are more prone to these forms of distress (Alexander & Krans, 2016). The recent passing of 14-year-old Amy "Dolly" Everett, a well-known young Australian (see, Overington, 2018), highlights how challenges embedded in social media practice can have devastating outcomes for young adolescent girls.

The selfie phenomenon has also raised concerns about girls' use of social media, especially, their identity construction. With digital devices in hand, 12 to 14 year old girls are generating new idealised versions of themselves to share with friends and others in networked spaces. While experimentation with appearance and identity is not new to this generation of girls, there is a key difference between past and present day curation. Contemporary girls are curating "glossed up" images of themselves, many of which are sexualised (Chang, 2015; Chua & Chang, 2016). Even though contemporary Western culture supports female sexiness as normal expression of gender, girls who directly flaunt their sexuality are often judged, punished, and shamed for this expression by both peers and adults (Ringrose et al., 2013). Consequently, girls' image production and social media postings often place them at risk for being objectified, ranked, betrayed, coerced, and judged (Cooper et al., 2016). Long term effects from these experiences have yet to be fully documented, however, preliminary work suggests adolescent girls' confidence, self-esteem, and identity construction can be seriously impaired by bullying and sexting incidences. Research is crucial given the effects social media can have on middle school girls' wellbeing especially during this time of significant social and emotional developmental (see, Main, 2017 and Main & Pendergast, 2017).

Online Safety and Wellbeing

For more than a decade, online safety and wellbeing have been at the forefront of educational research worldwide. More than ever, cybersafety programs, websites, and resources are a visible presence. *Safer Internet Day*, an annual worldwide event encouraging a better, respectful internet for everyone is celebrated in 130 countries (see, <https://www.saferinternetday.org>). In Australia, internet safety is mandated through federal and state safety and wellbeing campaigns. Community organisations and not-for-profit sectors also provide support services and educational resources. Recently, the Australian Government launched the *Online wellbeing hub* (Office of the eSafety Commissioner, 2018a), an initiative designed to bring together the best online safety and wellbeing resources countrywide. The initiative highlights the interconnectedness between online safety and wellbeing. The newness of the initiative makes it difficult to ascertain how many young people will actually use the resource but it is an important access point for getting appropriate information and

support to those who need it. Australian schools have also adopted a number of these safety and wellbeing strategies, some of which include: whole school anti-bullying-cybersafety policies, school assemblies targeting online safety and wellbeing, direct sanctions and zero-tolerance policies for bullying behaviours, teacher-led curricular activities for social and emotional learning, strategies for building resilience and mental health, mediation practices, restorative approaches, group methods such as the *Method of Shared Concern* (Rigby, 2005), and the adoption of external programs and resources including but not limited to:

MindMatters, headspace, Bullying No Way Website, Student Wellbeing Hub, Friendly Schools Programme, eSmart Schools system, and Office of the eSafety Commissioner website.

Another crucial aspect of intervention involves working with parents to provide them with the skills and mediation strategies needed to supervise and balance young people's online safety and wellbeing. However, the effectiveness of parent mediation approaches is mixed depending on the child's age, type of online risk being addressed, and device used to access internet services (Chen & Shi, 2018).

While anti-bullying approaches have been moderately successful in dealing with overt forms of bullying (e.g., physical and verbal forms), many schools report indirect forms of bullying, in particular cyberbullying and sexting, have either stayed the same or increased (Rigby & Johnson, 2016). This latter point is worrying given the amount of time and effort dedicated towards improving young people's online safety.

Online Safety Protocols

Online safety is the broad term used to describe protocols, practices and key messages about how to stay safe online. The terms cybersafety, internet safety, and esafety are also used to refer to these same practices. In Australia, the *Office of the eSafety Commissioner* (2018b) has responsibility for ensuring all Australians have safe and positive online experiences. To this end, the Office has developed and continues to extend a portfolio of supportive practices that focus on online safety, wellbeing, and digital citizenship. Positive engagement with technology is the key message and guidelines for staying safe reinforce this directive even as new challenges emerge in ever-changing social media contexts. Australian safety protocols and key practices for staying safe online are summarised in Table 1. Similar safety practices and wellbeing messages are promoted worldwide (see, for example,

www.saferinternetday.org). For the most part, cybersafety protocols and celebration-style events have proven to be reasonably successful in broadcasting general safety messages. Regardless of these ongoing efforts, middle school girls continue to experience online troubles with friends. The question is, why?

Table 1

Summary of Australian Online Safety Protocols. Adapted from the Office of the eSafety Commissioner (2018b).

Safety Protocols	Key Practices
Control personal information.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep profiles private. • Protect personal details and passwords.
Manage inappropriate contact.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Block it. • Report it. • Talk about it.
Engage safely.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Know your online world. • Make informed decisions. • Choose consciously.
Engage positively.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Think before you post. • Manage messages and images thoughtfully. • Ask permission before sharing content/images. • Treat others as you want to be treated.

In earlier research, Thompson (2016a, 2016b) found girls in middle schooling could easily describe general online safety practices, especially strategies for controlling personal information and managing inappropriate contact. Indeed, the girls could not only describe online safety protocols, they could provide detailed examples of what these strategies ‘looked like’ in their everyday practice. However, while the girls said they governed their online time cautiously and responsibly, a significant number of them continued to experienced online troubles, especially with friends. On further analysis, the study showed that the girls had a different set of rules and practices for engaging with friends online. At times, these practices led to troubles at school and online. While online safety protocols and cybersafety education protected most of them from unknown people and inappropriate web content, it was more difficult to ascertain the success of these protocols for girls’ daily encounters with friends.

This finding along with other research (see, for example, Cooper et al., 2016 and Ringrose et al., 2013) supports the notion that intervention approaches must take into consideration the needs of particular groups of young people, such as middle school girls, who may be disproportionately impacted by online demands specific to their age and developmental phase.

Despite middle school girls struggle with particular online challenges, there are few if any targeted strategies designed to help them effectively negotiate these concerns. The data discussed in this paper offers insight into middle school girls' online safety and social media practice. Findings clearly point to friendship as a mediating factor in middle school girls' online safety practice and social media awareness. Suggestions for cultivating social media awareness in middle school girls' friendships are offered as starting points for intervention.

The Study

The data discussed in this paper is drawn from the ongoing study *Girls Social Media Project* funded by Griffith Institute for Educational Research (GIER), Griffith University, Queensland, Australia. The project draws on principles of design anthropology/ethnography (Otto & Smith, 2013) to investigate middle school girls' social media use, safety awareness, and online practice with friends. Design anthropology/ethnography is a strong, visually engaging qualitative method that sets research within a design context (van Dijk, 2010). The method involves creating a contextual space for participants to explicitly generate materials, resources and/or products informed or inspired from their everyday lives. In this case, teenage girls co-create social media intervention resources such as YouTube clips, memes, self-help applications, vlogs or blogs, website pages or postings, and other items (e.g. pamphlets) for other girls their age. The girls' design work is still in progress so will not be reported here. However, preliminary findings concerning their social media use and online safety awareness are discussed as a means for informing teacher practice.

In October 2017, 75 Year 7 girls from two high schools in Queensland (approximately 30% of Year 7 girls from each school) agreed to complete an online survey. As per ethical requirements, all girls and parents/guardians signed HREC approved consent-to-participate forms. The survey was comprised of 23 questions ranging from tick-the-box (e.g., never, rarely, sometimes, frequently, a lot, and so on) and Likert-scaled options (e.g., very likely to

very unlikely) to free-text choices (e.g., Please tell us about ...). The questions were divided into three main sections: *Your Everyday Activities* (e.g., How much time do you spend online?), *Your Social Media* (e.g., What social media do you use?), and *Your Social Media Postings* (e.g., If a friend is upset by a message you post, what do you do?). Categorical and ordinal survey questions were converted into frequency themes [e.g., how often] (Saldana, 2009) and free-text accounts were analysed and coded into themes using recurrent word strings, phrases, and stated actions, practices and strategies (Boyatzis, 1998).

In November 2017, 38 of the same girls surveyed participated in one of 10 focus group discussions. Focus groups ranged in size from 2 to 8 participants and were comprised of girls grouped from the same homeroom (tutor/pastoral) class. In this way, each group could be carefully coordinated by the class teacher to avoid any possible personality clashes. Recurrent themes generated in survey contributions were used to stimulate discussions about social media experience and practice. The girls' conversations were audiotaped then transcribed. Focus group contributions were coded and analysed as per survey free-text accounts. Both the survey and focus group discussions generated rich and in-depth contributions. However, a higher ratio of participants from each school would more strongly support findings reported here.

Girls' Online Safety Protocols

Without much effort, almost all of the girls could describe online safety practices for controlling information and managing inappropriate content. Most girls agreed they used these strategies daily and much of what they had to say about their online activity reflected the language and practices promoted through online safety curriculums. Being able to nominate online safety practices is not uncommon. Many young Australians have a high awareness of online risks and understand strategies to stay safe (ACMA, 2011). How middle school girls specifically interpret and translate these practices into daily practice with friends is less clear even though scholarship has shown online communication has a strong impact on adolescent relationships (see, for example, Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008). In addition, there is reasonable evidence that girls are more likely than boys to use online platforms and social media to communicate with friends, plan social events, and share personal experiences (ACMA, 2008, 2015; Common Sense Media, 2012, Lenhart et al., 2015; Thompson, 2016a;

Wood, 2017). So, it was not surprising that these girls spoke extensively about how they personalised safety protocols to communicate more freely with friends.

Controlling information was mainstay to the girls' online safety. They protected themselves by using privacy settings (89%) and keeping personal information private (88%). The girls agreed they were careful about types of information posted on social media profiles (such as not saying what school they went to or the suburb they lived in) and said they did not let unknown people have access to their accounts. One girl explained, "I never put my full name in the username and make sure I always know a person before I let them follow an account of mine." A small number of girls used more extreme measures to protect their identity from strangers and "men acting like little girls". For example, one girl said, "I keep tape over my device camera to keep my identity unknown."

While most of the girls agreed they used privacy settings to protect themselves, it was clear they interpreted privacy guidelines in different ways for different people. Strict adherence to privacy rules applied to "people you don't know" or "people you should be careful about". Stranger danger tactics seemed reasonably effective given many girls could described strategies for checking friend requests (i.e., people who asked to follow them). "You search them up to see who else they know, you look to see what they are looking at, don't just click on yes." At the same time, a good portion of them had extensive online friendship circles and many of these friends had reasonable access to the girls' postings (i.e., messages and images). For communicating in online 'friend' contexts, many girls used code words, emojis, or special language to protect information and maintain privacy. "I use code words between me and my friends so we can communicate in our special way so that people reading our messages won't understand what we are trying to say." Code words and emoji were particularly useful for talking about events, "a crush", or people they disliked.

Using code words and symbols to camouflage meaning in online contexts is not new. Indeed, Marwick and boyd (2014) reported that young people frequently use stenographic practices (e.g., coding techniques to hide meaning) to manage and control privacy in online contexts. The interesting point here is that the codes or devices used by the girls had well-established meaning (e.g., 🔥 for "he's hot") but this transparency was not questioned by code/emoji users. So, even though girls' use of coding mechanisms assumed privacy, common understanding amongst peers may have inadvertently precluded privacy.

Managing inappropriate contact. The girls had a number of strategies for managing inappropriate contact which included blocking people (81%), reporting unkind messages and inappropriate pictures/material (70%), and talking about online problems to someone that could help (71%). However, the girls' blocking and reporting practices were not straightforward. When online problems involved people they didn't know, the girls blocked and reported the person or asked parents/carers for assistance. If good friends were involved, they preferred to work it out themselves. "I would ask them why they did it and explain why I don't like it. I would ask them to take it down. If that didn't work then I would tell my mum." They were far more likely to talk to parents (71%) about online problems than teachers (45%). On the other hand, when online challenges involved boys, embarrassing content, or awkward pictures, girls were more likely to seek assistance from friends (72%). Girls claimed they spoke to friends about their problems because parents over-reacted. One girl said, "my friend posts some really racy pictures and guys are always asking her for nudes. I tell her that she should tell someone, but she says her parents will take [her phone] away." Another girl said, "we like talking to boys but some boys send inappropriate things so if we tell our parents, they assume something is going on like we're dating and then we can't be friends with boys." Reporting problems was also associated with being a "snitch". "I want to handle it myself. I don't want my friends telling adults about it and I don't want to tell them either cause people will see me as a snitch. That's worse than putting up with stuff." While the girls knew and understood the importance of reporting online problems, for most, problems with friends were reported only when the situation could no longer be managed without adult intervention. That is, when the situation became critical.

While 'report it' recommendations have been mainstay to cybersafety education, the context and conditions of reporting have not been thoroughly investigated (i.e., the why and why not, the who and who not). In earlier work, the author (2016a) found that middle school girls were more likely to report other girls who were not considered friends. Beyond this basic condition (friend, not friend), other reporting patterns were not noted. In the current study, data shows that girls do translate reporting protocols in particular ways that minimise damage to friendships, sidestep adult intervention, and circumvent stigmatising outcomes. It is concerning that middle school girls will "put up with stuff" or wait until events become critical before seeking help. More work is needed in this area.

Girls' engagement with technology and social media

As previously mentioned, positive engagement with technology is a key safety message and guidelines for reinforcing this directive include protocols about how to engage safely and positively with the internet and others (Office of the eSafety Commissioner, 2018b). Response to survey questions showed that most of the girls had reasonable experience with technological devices and social media. Almost all of the girls (97%) were online daily. The average time spent online was one to three hours although a significant number of them (27%) spent more than four hours a day online. The girls used a range of devices for connecting to the internet. Most used devices were laptop computers (84%) and smartphones (75%). The girls went online regularly to listen to music (79%), keep in touch with friends (78%), watch videos (73%), do homework (74%), and check up on social media (67%). Social media was used frequently (54%) or fairly often (31%) although there was a small group (7%) who did not use social media at all. Top social media activities included following people they knew (95%), 'liking' pictures and posts (93%), 'commenting' on pictures and posts (78%), following celebrities and YouTubers (73%), and searching for new ideas or content (72%). Most popular social media were YouTube (81%), Instagram (72%) and Snapchat (62%). Social media used by the girls is summarised in *Table 2*. These findings are consistent with reports from the Australian Office of the eSafety Commissioner (see, *Research Insights: Young and Social Online*, 2016) suggesting the girls in this study are reasonably representative of young Australian social media users.

Table 2

Summary of girls' social media.

Engaging safely. In the online survey, 84% of the girls said they "felt okay" about their social media practice. However, in group discussions, the girls' capacity to engage with social media safely was not clear. When asked questions about age limitations, geo-location features, privacy controls, safety strategies for each service, and so forth, their answers were mixed and, frequently, incorrect. A simple example, several girls claimed Instagram and Snapchat age limit was 12. The age limit is actually 13. While some girls could explain Snap Map (i.e., the geo-location feature on Snapchat), there was at least one girl in each focus

group who used Snapchat but did not know about this feature or could not explain Ghost Mode (i.e., hiding yourself when posting ‘snaps’). Girls’ understandings about how social media services operated also varied.

I don’t think Year 7 girls are supposed to use Facebook. I think most adults use Facebook, since there’s a word limit on it, isn’t there? And photos are limited as well. So Instagram, you post your photos, which seems what Year 7 girls have been doing so far. Facebook is pretty limited, only people who follow you can see your content.

Another girl said,

On Facebook you can search them up and anyone can see your photos, so you can’t actually put your account on private. On Instagram you can put your account on private. But on Facebook you can’t so everyone can see what you’re doing and who you are, your information. That’s why I don’t put any information on Facebook.

Some girls had sage advice for others.

If you post a picture on Instagram, put the location on it later when you get home like about a week later.

If you take pictures, don’t have your street name on it. Just take a picture laying down on the grass or on a brick wall or on a white wall.

If you want to keep your identity safe, don’t use Snapchat because people can track where you are if you don’t have Ghost Mode on.

While some girls were consciously thinking about how to protect their identity, in the main, there was considerable confusion about how various social media services operated and the strategies needed in each space to protect themselves. Misperceptions were not overly surprising given more than three-quarters of them had drawn social media practices from discussions with friends not from informed online safety sources. “Yeah, my friend showed me and I was like ooh this is cool, I’ll just download it.” Peer pressure plays a key role in technological and social media adoption (Quan-Hasse & Young, 2010) and self-presentation approaches (Chua & Chang, 2016; Thompson, 2016a). It is likely that conforming to peer pressure places some girls at risk for online problems (O’Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011). Efforts to cultivate social media awareness in middle school girls must address peer pressure tensions and self-presentation norms.

Engaging positively. The girls talked about their social media in positive ways. Social media was valued because it allowed them to stay connected with friends in and out of school, they could post about daily events and good things that were happening, share content and look at things they were interested in. Staying in touch with family and friends overseas was also

important. Sharing pictures and videos with friends was a significant aspect of their social media. They had a lot to say about pictures that shouldn't be posted. "Girls post photos of their boobs and butts and other photos and they use emojis that mean rude things and send them to boys. They should act their age and stop posting inappropriate photos." While most girls said they used social media in positive ways, it was clear that "some girls post[ed] really inappropriate stuff". In general, the view was some girls were out of control on social media, started rumours, used "inappropriate language like swearing", and "posted way too much personal information". One girl advised, "Year 7 girls should limit their use and be more active!"

The girls agreed that they would not deliberately post something that would upset their friends but sometimes misunderstandings happened. If a friend was upset by one of their postings, 97% said they would take the image down immediately and apologise for hurting the friend's feelings. "I would delete the message and say I'm sorry and never do it again." Talking it out and trying to make the friend feel better was important to them ("I would talk to her about it and send her memes to make her feel better"). In reverse, when friends posted images they didn't like or found embarrassing there were mixed reactions. Some girls said they wouldn't take it too seriously ("if it's an ugly photo then it's funny so I'd just laugh") while others were a bit more thoughtful. "I would politely ask them to delete it. I would ask them to get my permission next time." Several girls were less sympathetic. "I would be really, really, really mad because anyone can see it and that would be dangerous and I will report her."

Overall, there was reasonable evidence the girls attached particular meaning to certain social media practices especially inappropriate images and language and rude emoji. No one claimed to view their own content in this way and, while some girls demonstrated clear alliance to the mottos, *think before you post* and *treat others as you want to be treated*, this trend was not consistent across the group. Indeed, the girls provided mixed messages about Year 7 girls' engagement with social media.

It goes to their head if they have a lot of likes and if you don't have likes, they laugh at you and I find that rude.

Social media can be harmful and Year 7 girls should be careful of their actions and how it affects others.

If you don't want strangers or your parents to see it then don't post it as everyone in the world has a way to see it.

The girls' attitudes towards social media engagement exemplify the ways in which they interpret, translate and enact various cybersafety protocols to manage and negotiate friendship. And, while many of these articulations can be traced back to core cybersafety messages, the girls' commitment to and expression of safety is clearly cultivated through the norms, practices and strategies of friendship. As pointed out by O'Keefe and Clark-Pearson (2011) and Thompson (2016a, 2016b), this articulation often places them in positions of vulnerability.

Cultivating Girls' Social Media Safety Awareness

As mentioned at the start of this paper, there are numerous national and international initiatives aimed at helping young people to stay safe online. The discussion to follow is not intended to replace those conventions but rather to add to and extend ways of thinking about online safety for middle school girls. As shown above, middle school girls *do* use online safety mechanisms to protect themselves online. However, the ways in which these protocols are interpreted, translated and enacted varies considerably, especially when friends are involved. In many cases, girls were not fully informed about the services they used or the safety mechanisms that worked best within those contexts. They often found out about these things from friends. Social media was understood for its great communicative power with friends but, again, the girls had mixed understandings of how to effectively and safely negotiate friendship in these spaces. Overall, friendship plays a critical role in how girls negotiate social media.

While government bodies and other philanthropic organisations have created excellent cybersafety resources and broad frameworks for addressing young people's online safety and wellbeing, findings reported here support the notion that specific measures for cultivating girls' social media safety awareness, especially with friends, is much needed. Preparation of specific curriculums that explicitly teach safe, responsible and ethical use of social media as well as awareness raising strategies for middle school girls seems essential work for school communities, teachers and parents. In this light, three strategies are offered as critical tools for educators and parents for cultivating middle school girls' social media awareness.

1. ***Informed use.*** It is vital that middle school girls develop an in-depth and critical understanding of social media. Building their repertoire of effective strategies for evaluating and using these applications is a must. Positive-use activities are a good starting point. For example, in groups, girls could research popular social media then develop safe-use guidelines for other girls their age using online safety guidelines. These activities not only engage them with online safety protocols but also encourage them to read the terms and conditions (i.e., the small print) of social media. Developing online literacy skills especially effective coding practices for privacy is central to developing a practical understanding of social media as well as formulating effective safety plans for their wellbeing. Given the rapid development of technology and the ongoing challenges faced by girls online, their capacity to make informed decisions about social media is crucial.
2. ***Help-seeking options.*** Help-seeking is an important life skill. Middle school girls need to be encouraged to ask for help when social media is causing them distress. Breaking down taboos and dispelling myths around help-seeking and reporting practices (see, Spears et al., 2015) is essential. The notion that being called a “snitch” is worse than putting up with bullying is concerning. Social and emotional learning curriculums must target these help-seeking fears. For middle school girls, help-seeking patterns mostly involve friends. Sessions designed to help girls help friends (e.g., this is how you help a friend...) are attractive, accessible approaches. Such sessions negates embarrassing or disciplinary effects of sharing problems, messages, and content with parents or teachers while providing a level of support that can sustain wellbeing.
3. ***Reflective self-mapping.*** Reflective self-mapping is based on therapeutic aspects of reflective journal writing, an approach often used to consider the impact of events or actions on self and others. This activity has been used with middle school girls before to help them map their private thoughts, ideas, feelings and understandings about challenging online events with friends (Thompson, 2016a). Reflective self-mapping is based on five levels of progressive thinking outlined by Bain, Ballantyne, Mills, and Lester (2002). The five levels are: describing what happen, explaining feelings about

what happened, connecting what happened to previous experiences, considering why it happened, and reconstructing possibilities for a different outcome. Asking girls to map and reflect on their social media experiences using the five levels of progressive reflection offers opportunities for them to re/think actions and plan possibilities for future online interaction. It is a problem-solving approach that aims to develop an empathetic eye towards social media activity. As such, the approach has potential to help them think more carefully before posting and to thoughtfully consider how they want to be treated by others and vice versa. The author (2016a) found reflective self-mapping of online experiences increased self-awareness of middle school girls and, in turn, helped them to think carefully and reasonably about their online actions.

The strategies listed above offer a starting point for considering how to create opportunities and conversations that help middle school girls interpret, translate and enact online practices while negotiating everyday interactions with friends. Teachers are encouraged to implement these strategies in core teaching areas (especially where digital technologies are prescriptive), wellbeing curriculums, and counselling activities. Parents and guardians can make use of these ideas as they develop home-based approaches for girls' social media use.

Conclusion

Achieving and sustaining middle school girls' online safety and wellbeing is core to the research reported here. The girls have articulated an everyday world where social media is dominated by friendship, a world that is neither online or offline but rather a complex and layered experience articulated through actions, practices and interactions translated through friendship norms and expectations and peer group pressures. More research is needed in this area. However, it is clear that middle school girls' everyday experience with friends impacts on their online safety and wellbeing.

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