Tweens on the Internet
- communication in virtual guest books

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Abstract

Today digital communication is a natural part of young people's social life. It has increased drastically during the last few years, and there are still a lot of questions about what this means, and how this new media affects communication. This study focuses on young people of 11-13, i.e.the age between children and teenagers, also called tweens. In a large study, the overall aim is to see what communication in the Internet community LunarStorm means to them in their social life. This particular paper reports on the content of the asynchronous communication in the participants' digital guest books, which is one of the main channels for communication between the participants.

A group of 15 tweens from a small village in Sweden were studied when communicating in Sweden's largest Internet community, LunarStorm. The research method used was what is usually described as cyber ethnography. The contributions in the participants' digital guest books are not written by the guest book owners themselves, which means that the focus is on the collective aspects of this communication, and not from a specific children's point of view. Qualitative analyses were made of the content of 947 contributions in the participants' guest books in order to make a statistical analysis.

Most of the participants' communication was between friends in the same geographical neighbourhood concerning how things are going, what to do, when to meet and similar things. The contributions were divided into three categories: (1) Social chat (2) Chain letters, and (3) Messages incomprehensible to outsiders. The information-category was divided into three sub-categories depending on the emotions expressed. 44% of the total messages were considered as emotionally neutral information, 39% as kind or encouraging, and also with an aim to sort things out, and 6% of the total messages contained insults and elements of anger.

Among the younger users of the Internet community LunarStorm, the main reason to participate seems to be to keep in touch with already known friends. Being part of an already existing group continues and develops online. The positive tone among the participants in the community and the possibility to express difficult feelings, which have been reported on earlier from LunarStorm, still seem to be present.

Introduction

Today digital communication is a natural part of young people's social life. It has increased drastically during the last few years, and there are still a lot of questions about what this means, and how this new medium affects communication (e.g. Livingstone & Bober, 2005; Rydin, 2003). The present study focuses on tweens, which is a concept for young people who are in be*tween* being children and teenagers. They do not want to be considered as children any more, and they are not yet part of the teenage culture. In this study the children are between 11 and 13 years old.

This paper presents part of a larger study where the overall aim is to understand what communication in the Internet community LunarStorm means to Swedish tweens in their social life. This particular paper reports on the content of the asynchronous communication in the participants' digital guest books, which is one of the main public channels for communication open to other participants, and according to themselves – the main channel. 'Public channel' in the sense that all other participants can see it. Another channel for communication within LunarStorm is the presentation page. However, since the tweens themselves in this study did not mention this at all, and most of the visible activity takes place in the guest books, I have chosen to separate these two channels and analyze the presentations in another paper (Enochsson, submitted).

LunarStorm

LunarStorm is Sweden's largest online community. It is used by over 80% of Swedish teenagers[1]. Many of the users start at the age of 10 and some even younger. At the age of 12-13 the majority of the children in the age group are users. LunarStorm is the most visited website in Sweden, and has been so for the last five years. The main activities are presenting oneself and communicating via guest books or Lunar-mail (Enochsson, 2005). When people want to chat, however, most of them use the application MSN Messenger, which is an instant messaging program used by about 80% of young teenagers in Sweden[2]. LunarStorm was the first national net community to attract such a big part of the population. Even though there are other both national and global communities competing with LunarStorm today (2007), LunarStorm has left important marks in the history of contemporary interaction media (Dunkels, 2007).

When becoming a member of LunarStorm you choose a Lunar-name. This is the name by which you will be known by other users. Most of the users choose a name without any apparent connection with themselves, others use their real-life nickname, and some their real name. Every member has their own space with a profile page, space for pictures, a guest book, and a list of added friends. All these features are public and can be seen by any member, unless the owner of the space has blocked access, which is possible to do for undesired visitors. Earlier there was a public diary which could be hidden from most of the visitors. Today this is a blog. In addition to the private spaces there are public spaces like a graffiti wall, discussion clubs and a lot of other meeting places.

LunarStorm have put a lot of effort into security and also good behavior on their site. There are blocking functions if you just do not want somebody to be able to look at your pages or write in your guest book. Members are asked to report misbehavior, and Lunar-crew can suspend people that do not behave well.

Any member can write a message in the guest books, and it is visible to everybody. When a more private conversation is required they use the mail function within LunarStorm, some other e-mail or IM (instant messaging) applications. The communication in the guest books is asynchronous, which

means that the written messages are waiting for the user when he or she goes online the next time. The people communicating do not have to be online at the same time.

It is difficult to describe a place where so many people do so many things and practically live their lives. Rheingold (2005) points out the importance of the emotional support member give each other. He also describes the strategic work of LunarStorm's management, and ends his description of their successful work with the words:

> For Sweden's youth, LunarStorm became a portal for information, connection, emotional support, and relief work, a role that traditional media could not fill. I think that qualifies as a kind of 'community'.

Online communication

Young people's and children's digital communication has been in focus from various angles. According to the media and also discussions I have been involved in at school meetings, the adult world (teachers and parents mainly) fears that the future population will develop into a group of anti-social people who will never leave their computers or mobile phones and who cannot spell. According to research, this will not be the case. It is true that Internet communication is very important in young people's lives (Brignall, 2005), but it is not only negative. Bargh and McKenna (2004) have made a review of articles concerning the social contacts of people who spend a lot of time on the Internet. They summarize that people spending a lot of time on online communication also spend a lot of time on off-line activities. The time used on the Internet is taken from TV watching and newspaper reading. Compared to non-Internet-users, these users are more likely to belong to off-line leisure, sports, religious and community organizations as well as voluntary and political organizations. The Internet also helps to maintain close ties with family and friends, and in addition to this facilitates the formation of close and meaningful new relationships. In an American study, 40% of the Internet users say that the use of the Internet has increased contact with family and friends (Annenberg Digital Future Project, 2006). This is in contrast to the fear that the Internet's anonymity would lead to more superficial relationships. What is important is time spent together and what is shared (Mersch, 2006). There is also reason to believe that personality plays a role with regard to which media you prefer (Peter, 2006).

Language

The language used in digital communication, also known as cyber-language, differs in some ways from other written communication. Hård af Segerstad (2002) claims there is no need to worry about deterioration of language because of this. Young people know very well when to use different styles. Some of this language is developed from the limited number of characters to be used when sending messages on a mobile phone, but even cyber-language has its different styles depending on the media. Hård af Segerstad calls this a creative adjustment to the special conditions given. There is a fear that the language may become rougher, and this has also been seen to some extent (Bjørnstad & Ellingsen, 2004). Bjørnstad and Ellingsen's informants think that there is a need for rougher language since facial expressions are not present. Behind the screen it is also easier to use rougher language, because you sometimes forget about others when sitting alone in front of the screen, and it is easier to accept responsibility for statements that would not have been said face to face. On the other hand it is also easier to apologize (Enochsson, 2005).

It is said that boys/men and girls/women have different ways of expressing themselves and use different words. Herring and Paolillo (2006) examined men's and women's web-logs from two different genres. In their rich statistical material they found that the difference between the genders was less than between the genres in ways of using language. It could also be seen that girls chose online interviews and boys face-to-face interviews when given the opportunity in a research project in school environment (Enochsson, 2007b). The girls' answers were longer and more informative online, and the boys' answers were longer and more informative face-to-face.

The use of emoticons is often mentioned as used to express feelings in digital communication (Hård af Segerstad, 2002; 2004). Wolf (2000) found that women were more frequent users of emoticons, and in mixed environments, this influenced men to use more emoticons. In another study where the participants answered questions in a questionnaire, the young men claimed that they used emoticons when e-mailing to a greater extent than the young women (Punyanunt-Carter & Hemby, 2006). Since the second study was conducted six years later the use of emoticons could have changed, but these results can also be an example of what we think we do or choose to present not always being what we really do.

Social life

The contacts online for young teenagers are mostly with already known friends (Enochsson, 2005; Livingstone & Bober, 2005). Bjørnstad and Ellingsen (2004), who collected their data some years earlier, at a time when instant messaging programs were not that frequent, found that the young people in their study were more dependent on their mobile phones than on the Internet. After chatting in public chat rooms for a period they got tired of it, and if there was the possibility, they continued with friends in IM applications. Bjørnstad and Ellingsen also found that the teenagers in their study always gave priority to friends offline over online contacts.

The feeling of being far away from the person addressed can make it easier for bullying. Bullying takes other forms, which it is important to be aware of, and the anonymity can be worse compared to offline bullying, since there is no opponent (Olin, 2003; Slonje & Smith, unpublished manuscript). However, it does not seem that bullying is more frequent online than offline (BRIS, 2001; Slonje & Smith, unpublished manuscript). Instead there are reports of various marginalized and low-status groups finding an arena to participate in society on more equal terms (e.g. Dahan & Sheffer, 2001; Hall, 2000; Leonardi, 2000; Tapscott, 1997; Weinrich, 1997), and young LunarStorm users also claim that they address each other more nicely in this medium than what is usual off-line (Enochsson, 2005)

It has been seen in statistics that girls communicate more than boys (e.g. Larsson, 2005). Boys claim they do other things on the Internet, like gaming for example. Observation studies have shown that the difference is not that big, but that it rather has to do with different approaches to activities (e.g. Bjørnstad & Ellingsen, 2004; Nordli, 2003).

Theoretical standpoint

Research within this area - children on the Internet – demands theories from both child research and media research, since there can be a risk of focusing too much on one of the fields and not being able to see the interaction between them (Livingstone & Bovill, 2001).

The surrounding society and common cultural beliefs affect us all, and our actions are constructed within these beliefs. Being part of a social group means

learning and identity building. To start with the participation is peripheral, you learn how to think and behave through feedback, and gradually you become a full member (Lave & Wenger, 1991/1998).

The Internet gives children access to an arena with new possibilities and affordances (Hernwall, 2001; Tapscott, 1997). As mentioned earlier, this has made it possible for new groups to find an arena for participating on more equal terms in social and political life.

In this particular study this means that the young people in the study create their own social life influenced by the environment around them, individuals as well as structures. Friends are friends, online as well as offline; what can differ might be the different possibilities different media offer.

Research questions

The overall aim of this study is to see what communication in the Internet community LunarStorm means to tweens in their social life. This particular paper reports on the content of the asynchronous communication in the participants' digital guest books, which is the main channel for communication between the participants, according to themselves.

- What is the content of the communication?

- How do the tweens address each other in this particular medium?

- Is there a difference between boys and girls?

The contributions in the participants' digital guest books are not written by the guest book owners themselves, which means that the focus becomes on the collective aspects of this communication, and not from a specific children's point of view.

Method

In this study, 15 tweens from a small village in Sweden with only one school were studied when communicating in Sweden's largest Internet community, LunarStorm. The participants in the study were all familiar to each other, even if not all of them were friends. The research method used was what is usually described as cyber ethnography (Markham, 1998), alternatively virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000), where the participants' own spaces within the community were studied. For seven weeks, divided into three periods during a period of seven months, all their activities in the community were documented. In addition, all participants were interviewed twice about their participation in LunarStorm and Internet communities in general. All these data were collected in 2005.

The participants' e-mail messages within the community were not accessible to the researcher. The participants also had the possibility of erasing messages sent to their own guest books. There was an automatic counting of the contributions in the guest books, i.e. if a message was erased before the researcher noticed it, it would still be included in the number of contributions. In this way it was possible to see if there were contributions missing. The children in this group did not erase any guest book contributions before the researcher was able to read them during this period.

Following ethical guidelines for the protection of participants is not always easy when doing research with children. There is an imbalance in power relations between adults and children which can be difficult to handle. Children do not always dare to say when they feel uncomfortable. The Internet medium makes it easier for children. They can for example shut down the computer and blame the technology (Dunkels & Enochsson, 2007). In this study one of the participants pretended to be someone else when contact for

deciding upon an interview was made online. This was interpreted as this child's way of withdrawing, and the interview never took place. There were meetings IRL with the participants and their parents, and they all agreed upon participating in writing.

In order to be able to read all that is written in the community, the researcher has to have her own account. All the children knew this and were invited to take contact within the community. Only one participant did so, and wrote 'Hello!' in my guest book. Apart from this, the only contact with the participants was within the framework of the study, such as telling them that it was the period of studying their personal spaces and deciding on appointments for interviews.

Knowing that somebody is watching you of course affects your actions. This has been known in research for a long time. This was also partly a reason for collecting a comparison material. It is also known that behind the screen it is easy to 'forget' that anybody can look at what you write, and I also got the impression from several participants that they had forgotten about my presence even though there were reminders. Because of this my presence in the community is not discussed further.

Analysis

In this paper, the analysis of the messages in the participants' digital guest books is presented. These messages were not written by the guest book owners themselves, which means that the focus is on the collective aspects of this communication, and is not from a specific child's point of view. Since these data are part of a larger ethnographic study there are interviews and other material from the community, which work as a background and also a way of triangulating the written conversations.

Qualitative analyses were made of the contents of 947 messages in the participants' guest books. In order to make a minor statistical analysis, three different categories were decided upon. The categories differed in content and the way of addressing the receiver. All the messages were quite short and are considered as one whole message. Since all the participants were familiar to each other, a comparison material of 200 messages was collected from 20 other guest books, owned by tweens from different parts of the country. Those guest book owners were not contacted, and the material was not saved afterwards. These messages were analyzed in the same way. Most of the young people in the comparison group had erased a lot of old messages, but the messages chosen were all recent.

The intent of a message is of course difficult to interpret. Irony is a widely used genre among young people, and emoticons to clarify feelings were exceptions. Bullying is known to be invisible to outsiders – or at least to parents and teachers. It can consist of seemingly nice messages, but in a context they can be cruel. Bullying can also be the absence of a comment or just not being included (Bliding, Holm, & Hägglund, 2002; Olin, 2003). This is very hard for a researcher to trace. All the messages have been traced as far as possible, to analyze the context in which they were written. There has also been information about relations from teachers and children. This has been taken into consideration, but some things can have been misinterpreted anyway. On the other hand, some of the unkind messages are written as irony, and in a big material the tendency is clear anyway. The aim has not been to uncover certain relations or bullying, but to study the kind of communication in this community, and what it means socially to the young people participating. According to various kinds of statistics on the frequency of bullying (BRIS, 2001; Skolverket, 2004), this medium does not seem to increase the frequency of bullying for this age group.

Result

Most of the participants' communication was among friends in the same geographical neighborhood concerning how things are going, what to do, when to meet and similar things. Only a handful of the messages could be considered as written by people unknown to the guest book owner. This is also what the participants claim in the interviews. To many users it seems that it is not very interesting to communicate with totally unknown people, perhaps because you need to be more careful in those contacts, which is mentioned. Messages from outside the particular group were mainly from siblings and older friends from the same village, and it is assumed that most of the contributors are known by all the participants.

The majority of the participants were girls, and the girls also wrote the main body of the messages in the boys' guest books. Two thirds of the messages were written by girls, and the girls also wrote longer messages. Some children claim that they are shy and that this is a reason why they prefer to have contact with their friends by writing messages on the Internet.

The majority of the messages (89%) are messages that are just written to find out what the other person is doing or just to keep in touch. A lot of messages contain the questions 'How are you doing?' 'What are you doing?' or various answers to this. The participants write the main body of these messages when arriving home from school to friends they left half an hour earlier. Socially these messages are not neutral, since it seems important to show that you are available and also that you belong to a group within this online community. In addition to this there are emotions of different kinds expressed. About half of these messages express emotions: kind, encouraging, insults or anger. The rest of the messages (11%) are either chain letters – which sometimes caused anger – or messages incomprehensible to outsiders.

In the following presentation there are three categories of messages (1) Social chat, (2) Chain letters, and (3) Messages incomprehensible to outsiders. The Social chat category is divided into three sub-categories depending on the emotion expressed; (a) Emotionally neutral messages, (b) Kind and encouraging messages, and (c) Insults and angry messages. The other two categories do not contain any personal emotions. Even though emoticons are widely used in the digital text genre, they are exceptions here. If the participants paid for an extra service it was also possible to use pictures and colours in addition to the written message. This was also very rarely found even though about half of the participants in this group paid for this service. They used the extra tools available through this service for other purposes, which is described in another article (Enochsson, submitted).

The messages in the guest books are all written in Swedish, and they are written in a kind of spoken language containing misspellings and with some words missing. This means that a translation would be very complicated, and has not been done. Instead there is an explanation of the content. Within brackets it is possible to see whether it is a boy (P) or a girl (F) who has written the message and the age of the writer.

1. Social chat

(a) Emotionally neutral messages
This sub-category includes all the contributions that are just written to find out what the other person is doing or just to keep in touch by saying hello or questions and answers. Punctuation marks are widely used to strengthen expressions, even if no emotions are expressed here. Here 44% of the total body of messages are found.

> msn?? gööres?? (P11)
>
> ("Translation": Can we meet on MSN Messenger? What are you doing?)

En killle! (P12)

(A boy!)

hej?? nja snart gå och läsa en bok?? hehe sj?? mm jag med som bara fassen??men du ska du tävla nått i vinter da?? snälla? (F12)

(Hi?? Well, I will soon go and read a book?? Hehe, and what about you?? Yes, me too, like *?? But will you be doing any competing this winter?? Please?)

oki....herrå (F12)

(OK...bye)

(b) Kind and encouraging messages

Here are the messages which, in addition to just being social, also say something nice or encouraging to the receiver, like saying that the person is nice or just sending a hug or a kiss. In a way these messages seem to have the same function as the neutral ones– to keep in touch and to find out what the other person is doing. There is sometimes an aim to sort things out - things that could have happened earlier that day in school. Some are asking to be forgiven. A few are love messages between a boy and a girl. This category contains 39% of the messages, and the majority of them are written by girls.

Gör..??? Kramiar (F12)

(What are you doing..??? Hugs)

oki! vad bra!! saknar dejj kommer inte du till backen? kramizzz! (F11)

(OK! Fine!! I miss you. Aren't you coming to the slalom slope? Hugs!)

jag e sjuk, men annars e det bra. vad har du gjort i helgen då? älskar dej guman (F16)

(I'm sick, but otherwise all is well. What did you do this weekend? I love you, sweetie)

mmh.. hade bra.. Puss (P13)

(Have a nice time...Kiss)

(c) Insults and angry messages

In contrast to the positive messages there are also negative ones. The texts contain insults or elements of anger. Some of them are reactions to a person who has sent a chain letter. Even if the messages in this category are few and so are the messages from unknown persons, it is obvious that some people do not want to be disturbed by a person they do not know. Slightly angry messages can be directed to a newcomer to explain what is proper behaviour. Six percent of the messages are considered to belong to this category.

Fan va arg du är har du MENS? (F13)

(* you ARE angry! Have you got your period?)

nähä skit i det då fjortis (P15)

(Don't bother then, .,...[insulting expression about age])

ja eller hur...jätte kul... (F12)

(Yes, sure, very funny)

hatar dei fatta (P11)

(I hate you. Get it?)

2. Chain letters

A chain letter is a letter that is meant to be forwarded to more than one person, so that it will spread to a lot of people. Sometimes chain letters can be serious with an aim to spread information and to make people engaged in some special matter. However, the types of chain letters found in these guest books were of the kind: "if you pass this on, you will get..." and "if you don't, you will get....". Here we find 7% of the messages, and here is an example of a typical one:

> har precis blivit kysst av kyss guden Skicka denna till minst 2 personer..Annars får du inte ett bra hångel på ett år Skojar inte., detta är en kedja som startade 2005.. om du skickar till 10 st kommer du att få en kyss inom 6 dar.. om du skickar till 15 st kommer du att få den du älskar...=) (tiden börjar nu)... man vill ju inte utmana ödet precis... (F12)

> (I have just been kissed by the kissing god. Send this message to at least 2 people, or you will not get a good snog within a year. I'm not kidding. This is a chain that started in 2005. If you send it to 10 people you will have a kiss within 6 days, if you send it to 15 people you will get the one you love....=) counting starts now....you don't want to tempt fate, do you?)

3. Messages incomprehensible to outsiders

Some messages seemed at a first glance quite unintelligible, but in a context a message containing just "aaaa..." could correspond to a spoken alternative to the Swedish word "yes". The longer, the more emphasis. Sometimes interpretations like this were obvious, other times they were not. When it was not obvious the messages were considered as incomprehensible. The interpretation is that some were written to be totally incomprehensible, and others as private jokes between the correspondents. This category comprises 4% of the messages.

> ihhihihi..!! det kommer en biiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiil (F12)

> (ihihihihi..!! there is a caaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaar)

> dklscskjlsjdsöldjsölad fjklkdsufjlksdfjnldsk bdskfldsnfkldsnf ldsfödsmflömflödsmföl mldsfmdslöfmöldsnf,.mdxflödsjflödsfd nfdskfjldösfjnlösdjfsjflödsjfösdljflödsf jlödsjflödjsflödjföldsjföldsjflösd jj jkfldsjflödsjföljdsflödsföjdlösfjdsöljf ldösjfldsjflöjflösdjflödsjflödsjfölsjdfö jdsföurhgjlögjlöjfdslöjföldsjflöhgrejfdo gurpongkföuogrpjgopr (P12)

> (Translation not possible)

In Table 1 the percentages of messages of the total are presented.

Table 1 – The percentages of the various contributions to the guest books distributed over the five categories.

Category	Sub-category (% of cat.1)	Percentage of total
1. Social chat (89%)	*a. Emotionally neutral (49%)*	44%
	b. Encouraging or kind (44%)	39%
	c. Insults or anger (7%)	6%
2. Chain letters		7%
3. Incomprehensible		4%

Most of the messages are quite neutral and also kind. Although the kind and encouraging messages are quite frequent overall, they are mostly girls-to-girls in this material. Kind messages between girls are not only what the adult world regards as friendly, but also contain expressions previously almost only used by lovers. It seems to be a way to express close friendship, and is frequently used between sisters and female cousins, for example.

The comparison material had a similar distribution of the various kinds of messages, apart from there being a few more kind messages and slightly fewer chain letters. This could be due to unwanted messages having been erased to some extent, but since the collected messages were quite recent, most of them written during the last few days, this did not seem to be too great an issue. There was a great resemblance between the participants' guest books and the guest books in the comparison material.

According to the contents of the comparison material, the main body of messages were written between friends known from school or leisure activities, or family members.

Discussion

It can be seen in this study and in other studies as well that the main interest of communication for tweens and also younger children is to keep in touch with friends they already know from face-to-face contacts (Enochsson, 2005; Livingstone & Bober, 2005). Only a handful of the messages could be considered as written by people unknown to the guest book owner. This is also what the participants claim in the interviews. To many users it seems that it is not very interesting to communicate with totally unknown people, and you also have to be more careful in those contacts. But it is also known that the older the person gets, the more likely they are to find new friends online (Enochsson, 2005; Livingstone & Bober, 2005).

Moinian (2006) interprets this from a perspective where young people have fewer opportunities than earlier to meet face-to-face. The adult world controls more of children's and young people's time and space. A reason for this, which Moinian mentions, is that in a big city like Stockholm, where her participants live, homes can be spatially dispersed and children have to wait for parents to come home to drive them to their friends. I would say that the same thing goes for the countryside, the setting for the present study. School and Internet communities are the available meeting-places. These become very important places for building relations. Being part of an already existing group offline continues and develops online.

Even if it is possible for anybody to read what is written in a guest book, the feeling of privacy makes it easier to express oneself. When the meeting-place cannot be in a sphere separated from the parents this privacy becomes more important. Writing a message is silent and the rest of the family cannot hear you (Dunkels & Enochsson, 2007).

Most of the messages are quite neutral and also kind. In an earlier study (Enochsson, 2005), tweens claimed that they were more kind and friendly when communicating on LunarStorm than face to face. In the study mentioned, which was not a quantitative one, both sexes claimed this, but it seems here that the girls write kindly more often. The feeling that it is easier to be kind seems important, at least for the girls, in their use of this medium. Several examples are given of how they solve problems that are not easy to solve at school, where all their friends are present. Being alone, at home in the evening, gives you time to think and to formulate exactly what you want to say. It is of course easier even to say things that are not very polite or nice, there are examples of this. But the nasty messages seemed to be quite evenly

distributed among the participants' guest books. All of them were not friends, but according to the teachers at school, nobody seemed to be totally excluded from the group. Angry messages were sometimes caused by a behaviour that was not considered as proper in this environment. Sometimes these messages were reactions to chain letters or an unwanted visit. Newcomers learnt quickly how to fit into the group.

Even if the kind and encouraging messages are quite frequent overall, they are mostly girls-to-girls in this material. Kindness occurs among boys, but expressing love by using words like 'I love you' or 'kisses' seems to be limited to girls or a boy and a girl in a couple. Boys are expected to have a rougher language, and a boy who crosses the gender boundary by saying 'love' to another boy takes the risk of being called sissy, which is very negative. Being a sissy is also negative for a girl, but since girls are allowed to tell other girls they like and love them, this will not cause the same problem (Thorne, 1993). Boys are told to build their identities by separating themselves from each other while girls want fellowship in this process (Tarullo, 1994). This means that expressing closeness becomes more important to girls, while boys need to keep a distance. In this material this does not mean that the boys are the only ones using a rougher language. In that respect the genders are equal.

A question that arises is how these, at least for a Swedish context, strong expressions showing love have developed. Those expressions, which teenage girls today use among each other, were earlier reserved for lovers. One can speculate about the influence of American TV series, where the use of 'I love you' is more frequent also among friends.

The division between girls communicating and boys gaming is not as clear as statistics often show (Enochsson, 2007a), but in this group it seems that the girls at least wrote more and longer messages. It is known that in public spheres like classrooms, boys talk a lot more than girls and also use more space (Thorne, 1993). Boys are used to being listened to, but girls are not. This might be a reason for girls to choose this medium, to be able to say all those things that were never said because of the expectations of being quiet. This is also in line with Enochsson's (2007b) study about online interviews, where girls seemed to favour online interviews and boys face-to-face interviews.

We are also sensitive to expectations from others. Girls are not only expected to be nice to each other, and boys to keep a distance, as mentioned above. Media reports on girls' frequent e-mailing and chatting on the Internet and boys' gaming, can contribute to increasing the differences and preserving gender differences, since certain behaviour is legitimated and other behaviour is not.

The participants belonged to a clearly defined group. In one way there are a lot of similarities between the participants' way of expressing themselves, e.g lack of emoticons, short expression etc., and when newcomers are corrected it is possible to notice a change afterwards. According to Herring and Paolillo (2006) the genre differences are more obvious than gender differences, but it is not clear in these guest books. There are gender differences that are quite obvious, e.g. girls using more emotional expressions. Maybe this is not only *one* genre. The fact that "everybody"[3] is joining in might open up for several genres in parallel, and the gender differences are the most visible – reflecting society as a whole.

The lack of emoticons is worth mentioning. This material was collected in 2005 and the participants came from a rural setting. Several of them were also quite new users of this medium since they were quite young. When looking around randomly in LunarStorm's guest books in 2007, it is easy to see that the use of emoticons has become more common. It can also be seen that the youngest users and newcomers use emoticons less, and an explanation may be that these users had not really discovered the use of emoticons yet, since they did not have a lot of contacts outside the group. This has to be studied further

Concluding remarks

Within LunarStorm it is possible to meet 'anybody'. In spite of this, young participants stay with each other in the local group. Since it has been seen that talking online is less satisfying than meeting friends offline, this is not surprising (Bjørnstad & Ellingsen, 2004; Livingstone & Bober, 2005). This medium is seen as a complement to, rather than a substitute for, offline contacts (Enochsson, 2005). It is an important complementary social arena where young people can build relations and form identities without leaving the, in one sense, safe environment of their homes. The medium also makes it possible to deepen these contacts, since being alone in front of the computer offers the possibility to formulate oneself in peace and quiet. The privacy offered by this medium is important from several aspects, not least the fact the conversation cannot be heard by parents, siblings or other friends.

The positive tone among the participants in the community and the possibility to express complex feelings which have been reported on earlier from LunarStorm (Enochsson, 2005) still seem to be present, and so do offline gender differences in the respect that girls tend to express more closeness to each other.

It seems that this type of medium affords possibilities that are not easily accessible to everybody offline, for example shy people and groups that are given less attention in other media (e.g. girls talking in public spheres). The common depiction of teenagers, and also tweens, is that they know 'everything' about computers, and that they are 'always' connected to the Internet. According to recent statistics, more than 90% of Swedish pupils between 11 and 16 have Internet access from their home computers, and two thirds of these have broadband connections (Skolverket, skolutveckling, Sveriges kommuner och landsting, KKS, & Microsoft, 2005). This does not mean that all those young people spend their lives in front of the computer. There can be different kinds of restrictions for using the family computer (Enochsson, 2005). In a British study it was found that 16% of 9-19 year olds rarely used the Internet or did not use it at all (Livingstone & Bober, 2005). This was not only due to lack of interest. Almost half of them said they lacked access, and only one fourth said they were not interested. Livingstone and Bober claim that there is a digital divide even *within* western society. Sjöberg (2002) found that it was more common for boys to have their own computers in their rooms than for girls. Allowing boys this but not girls can be parents' way of protecting their daughters from getting picked up by older men who seek sexual contacts on the Internet, but it also means that there can be a digital divide even within families..

What can it mean to those who still do not have access to this medium but nevertheless live in western society and meet friends at school who are able to continue socializing online after school? Does society have a responsibility towards those young people who have no access? My aim is not to answer this question, but just to point out the problem. What it can mean to be left outside this type of communication has to be further investigated.

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[1] For statistics on visitors to different Swedish websites: http://www.mediacom.it-norr.se/23/kia/final_web/con_web_month_mt.asp?. See also LunarStorm's own visitor statistics at http://www.lunarworks.se

[2] According to an online questionnaire within LunarStorm Jan 6th 2004 , in which 158,542 users answered the question about which IM applications they used.

[3] Since 80% of teenagers participate, as mentioned earlier.