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ADOLESCENT GIRLS, CLOTHING, AND IDENTITY FORMATION

A Chapter Style Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Masters in Education-Professional Development

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ADOLESCENT GIRLS, CLOTHING, AND IDENTITY FORMATION

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We recommend acceptance of this thesis in partial fulfillment of the candidate's requirements for the degree of Masters in Education-Professional Development.

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The purpose of this research project is to examine how middle school girls use dress as a signifier of self during a critical period identity formation. More specifically, this study examined what societal and cultural structures influence clothing choice at this age through a case study of six seventh grade girls. Through analyzing a series of open interviews during the three month period of December 2010 to February 2011 organized around (1) clothing and school dress code, (2) sexual education, (3) friend groups and social structure in school, and (4) popular culture, the study gauged how cultural perceptions about gender and consumerism influenced clothing choices subjects made despite perceived autonomy. Findings of this study support examining how sports teams reinforce gender norms within schools, relevant sexual education curriculum for middle school students that includes a discussion of romantic relationships, and teaching critical media literacy. It also has implications for teacher educators and teacher education classrooms.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION
A Narrative Introduction to the Researcher

Throughout my childhood and adolescence, there were few times that I felt like I was a “proper” girl—even when I tried my hardest to conform to societal rules I found I fell short. My mother likes to say that I was a “nice, easy baby, but got worse and worse as I got older.” When she says this I know she’s half kidding; I’m a little insulted, but also not convinced that “nice” and “easy” are things I want to be any more. As an adult, shouldn’t I strive for opinionated, smart, and dynamic? For better or worse, I am no longer a child. Part of my responsibility as I become an educator is to address and explore some of the fallacies that shaped my school experience and led me to undertake this project. Patriarchal ideas of what constitutes “the norm” are still reproduced by the modern education system and society as a whole.

Although I spent a happy childhood playing outside, things changed in middle school when the differences between boys and girls become more socially pronounced and important. Starting 6th grade as a girl with short hair was especially difficult. I quickly grew tired my male classmates asking me if I was part of The Beatles and if I flew to England for my monthly haircut. I sought shelter in a group of similarly self-conscious girls, became preoccupied with my appearance, and vowed to always wear my hair long. School was no longer a priority; I focused on my social life. Although my
grades were passable, my teachers were frustrated with my incessant talking and bad attitude. I was “wasting potential” at a rapid rate, causing my mom to exclaim in desperation, “When you’re standing on the street corner, sixteen, smoking, and pregnant, we’ll know why!” Although I struggled to relate academic performance and promiscuity (I had not experienced my first kiss yet), I noted that this—the worst thing that could possibly happen to me—was a distinctly female predicament. I was now fitting into my gender role, but it came with different judgments and pitfalls. My friends and I laughed about my mother’s words on the way to school the next morning, but her prophesy still haunted me.

Looking back, I can understand why my mother was nervous. I was one of the tallest girls in my class and consistently mistaken for a university student around town. She refused to buy me the tank tops and short shorts that were in style at time, claiming I was advertising myself in a slutty way. I had a special wardrobe for vacations: clothes that I wouldn’t be caught dead in at school, but she deemed appropriate for family outings. Clearly the self within the clothes was not nearly as important as what I conveyed to others, what my clothes made my mother think when she looked at me. When my mom found out I had skipped a confirmation class, she assumed I was sneaking out with a boyfriend and gave me a very serious sex talk. I had been at a girlfriend’s house while she babysat her little sister, making macaroni and cheese and playing the piano. Instead of correcting my mom, I stared out the car window and said very little. She made my curfew earlier, and further restricted my social life.

Although 8th grade sexual education class was rumored to be an eye-opening experience, it too is blurry except for a few standout occurrences. I can confidently say
that my health teacher dressed up like a superhero condom every Halloween. He showed extremely graphic STD slides to demonstrate the dangers of premarital sex (I now know that diseases don’t care about the marital status of a person, but this didn’t occur to me at the time). Also, we spent one whole class period watching a horrifying live birth video. It was extremely bloody and unpleasant—one of my friends asked to go to the bathroom, and then passed out on the floor. The class was considered modern and liberal because of how openly our teacher discussed heterosexual sex. Although we learned about contraception, it was clear that sexual intercourse was a very high stakes activity indeed, especially for girls: “Even if you’re with a long-term partner, keep in mind that you need to consider the consequences and weigh your options each time you have sex—even if you’ve done it before, this could be the time you get pregnant. This could be the time you get AIDS.” Males were consistently presented as immoral pleasure-seekers, and females as virginal flowers who needed to resist being duped by these predators (Fine, 1998). The possibility of female desire and sexual enjoyment was never discussed (Fine, 1998).

In high school, I continued to take the messages from 8th grade sexual education to heart. I dated many different people, but knew that I needed to make my first time really “special.” I would know when the time was right, it would be romantic, and it would change my life and outlook forever. Because of my refusal to engage in sexual activity, I soon earned a reputation as a “tease.” This didn’t really bother me—I was proud of my decision to wait for the right person and the right time. Sadly, when I lost my virginity to a long-term boyfriend my senior year, I was too guilt ridden to even enjoy myself. Did I wait long enough? Why didn’t I feel more euphoric and secure? How
could life just continue on normally after such an important event? I wasn’t worried about getting a slutty reputation, but that the act hadn’t changed me in the ways I expected. When I found out two weeks later that he was sleeping with another girl in our class, I was convinced that I had made a huge mistake. I didn’t expect us to get married, but I wanted to be able to look back on the relationship fondly. Now when considering this identity changing experience, I would be continually forced to acknowledge that I was fooled by a lying jerk! I felt dirty and anxious— I knew through the knowledge imparted to me through sexual education class that I had thrown away my only chance at sexual normalcy and decency.

This part of my story sounds like a vignette my 8th grade sexual education teacher would have used to drive his points about female chastity home: “See? See girls?! She should have waited for the right time. Even before she found out her boyfriend was cheating on her, her gut told her that this was not the right situation or the right person. She didn’t feel how she was supposed to feel when giving someone her precious gift for the first time. She can only give it once! What if she would have gotten pregnant? Would he have been there for her?”

Having a few more years under my belt, these kinds of conservative urgings both enrage and disgust me. The protection of the mythological main-stream family unit at the expense of girls’ well-being and self-worth is appalling and should not be taught in schools. The fable surrounding virginity, the idea that a female’s first sexual experience will ultimately change the core of her being, serves only to perpetuate ideas of men as creators, shapers, definers, controllers of females (Fine, 1998; Driscoll, 2002; Butler, 2006). In the majority of sexual education curriculums, sexual intercourse occurs only
when women are acted upon—their options are either to abstain or to let themselves become victims of male desire (Fine, 1998). I realize now that the guilt and pain I experienced after choosing to have sex stemmed mainly from the disruption of the story that I had been told, and continued to tell myself, as I progressed towards adulthood (Haber, 1994). It permeated not only the sexual education curriculum, but the other rules and regulations set in place by the schools and larger society. This grand narrative had nothing to do with the quality of this teenage relationship or my boyfriend’s intentions, but a pervading normalizing discourse of what it takes to be successful in modern society.

Scrambling to make things right, I apologized to him. I tried my hardest to get us back together so I could somehow rectify my mistake and avoid becoming a sexual pariah for life. We suffered through our last six months of high school as a couple, but the feelings of security and new identity I believed went hand-in-hand with sex never surfaced. The outward signs to others that I had made the right decision in a happy relationship were there, but my identity had been shaped in what I believed much be an abnormal way.

**Why this Study in Particular?**

The idea for this study came from a troubling experience I had in a class designed to prepare education students for their first in-school field experience. The professor, Mr. Brown, was a retired high school teacher who was passionate, witty, and knowledgeable. He worked hard to build a classroom atmosphere of comfort and respect; although the class met early in the morning five days a week, my classmates and I enjoyed being there.

On the day that we were scheduled to discuss sexual harassment in school, I was interested to hear what kinds of conversations would take place. I viewed the issue as
both real and important; two teachers during my high school career had been accused of sexual harassment. Furthermore, because gender issues have always been of interest to me, I arrived alert and ready to begin.

Mr. Brown began by saying that there was no reason to ever be alone with a student: always be sure to leave the classroom door open when conferencing. That seemed like good advice. He went on, stating that men were charged with sexual harassment suits much more often than females. Girls in middle school and high school often dressed in a sexy way, so men need to be especially guarded and careful. Mr. Brown then implied that it was natural for men to look at girls if they were exposed, but this can be especially dangers for teachers. Things were starting to sound a little strange, but it was the next part that really shocked me. Mr. Brown then said something like this (I took notes in my class notebook):

You might think they don’t know what they’re doing, but they do. If a girl is dressed in a provocative manner, don’t look at her. Don’t pause or crouch down by her desk. Avoid touching her at all costs, even on the shoulder. You really don’t want her to get the impression you’re flirting with her, or hitting on her, or… some girls target teachers.

Middle school girls using their sexual allure to entrap teachers? Middle school girls soliciting sex from their teachers? Based on my own middle school experiences, I was almost certain this was not the case. When I insisted that this characterization was unfair, many of the other students in the class (male and female) said that they had encountered such “young sluts” themselves. Young girls dressed in a sexy manner were often looking for sex. Even if they weren’t actually trying to elicit sex, they wanted people to view them in a sexual way because of the power they appropriated. This power allowed them
to get back at adults through attracting inappropriate attention and filing sexual
harassment suits.

I found it hard to believe that every twelve year old wearing short shorts was this
conniving. And, isn’t the problem more with the male teachers looking (somehow not
responsible for their actions) and not the girls wearing these clothes? The people in this
class were future educators who were supposed to support and nurture youth. These
kinds of quick judgments were potentially harmful to a girl’s education and sense of self.
I did my best to argue my side in class, but these protests were drowned by stories of
garish outfits and breasts falling out of homecoming dresses. When the opportunity to do
research through the University of La Crosse presented itself, I hoped that through
conducting a series of interviews with 7th grade girls, I could cause educators to rethink
their views of girls dressed in sexual clothing: Are there factors dictating clothing choice
that take away from a girl’s sense of autonomy, or do they truly “know what they’re
doing”? Even if they do, are they to blame for the attention they receive?
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, I seek to form a poststructuralist feminist lens through the examination of important literature. The organization of this section is as follows: (1) A liberal history of feminism, moving from the first through third waves, followed by a brief comment on modern notions of conservative “feminism,” (2) problems with this white middle class liberal history because it leaves out race and class, (3) post structural elements which names gender itself as a problematic category, (4) school and what kinds of dominating systems are reproduced for girls particularly through the sexual education curriculum, (5) identity formation and creation in adolescents.

A Liberal History of Feminism

This section provides a brief historical overview of feminism in the United States. Most of the academic sources I encountered divided feminist into three waves, so I did the same. It has been suggested that these hegemonic ideas of feminism should be abandoned altogether—why divide the movement into generations or waves at all (Siegel, 1997)? In some ways, these labels are more divisive than practical (this can especially be seen in the beginning of the third wave). In my view, each wave represents a time period in which notions of the male/female binary were dramatically shifting in a unique way—although imposing these “waves” on historical events is just another example of a fabricated structure created to help order the world for comfortable
understanding, studying how notions of feminism and gender have changed over time helps us understand how feminism is conceived at the present time. In the words of Denzin and Lincoln (2005), providing a history, though “socially constructed and only quasi historical[,]… permits a “performance” of developing ideas” (p. 2).

While reading this section, please consider the story of Mr. Brown, who had been in the classroom for over thirty years—which concepts of feminism was he drawing on for “sexual harassment day”? Is it possible that he stopped learning about or internalizing feminist ideas at a certain time period in his life?

**The First Wave**

Feminism is loosely defined as the belief in women’s equality to men, and the advocacy for equal rights for all people regardless of gender. Within this definition, there lies the inherent implication that women have not yet achieved equality under the law, and that they are in a disadvantaged position to men. By modern standards, this definition of feminism sounds like an inoffensive cause that most women would readily join. However, because the term continuously changes as the movement progresses and often carries negative connotations, many are reluctant to identify themselves as feminists. Despite some major legal strides made since the feminist movement took hold in the United States in the mid-1800s, the crippling, underlying patriarchal values largely remain today.

In her extensive work on feminism, Estelle Freedman (2002) identifies feminism as a political movement that arose due to two historical conditions after the civil war. First, the emergence of capitalism began to disrupt the family unit. Women realized that they no longer needed to be dependents on a male provider; they could do their own work
and make their own money (Freedman, 2002). In conjunction, dissatisfaction with the fact that political privileges were extended only to men *because* they were viewed as the primary breadwinners of the family seemed unjust (Freedman, 2002). In 1848, the first women’s rights convention was held in Seneca Falls, New York to address these legal issues (Freedman, 2002).

Victorian ideas were still prominent during this time period. Middle and upper class women especially believed that they should subscribe to “the cult of true womanhood” (Welter, 1966). This cult (aptly named) required women to focus on cultivating four key virtues: piety, purity, submission and domesticity (Welter, 1966). Because women were considered more spiritual and ethereal than men, they were expected to compliment male rationality. This goes hand in hand with the purity virtue—women were to be of untainted mind, body, and soul (Welter, 1966; Perkins, 1983). They were required to maintain their virginity until marriage (a value closely linked with the bible), and never enjoy or initiate sex. Women were supposed to maintain a childlike demeanor throughout life, and abide by their husband’s authority without question (Welter, 1966). They were discouraged from aggressively pursuing intellectual activities, which could cause a woman to become shrewish and disagreeable.

Although the American Industrial Revolution that took place throughout the mid-1800s had caused there to be less of a distinction between work and the home (male roles and female roles, respectively), women were still expected to maintain the domestic atmosphere by keeping their house according to these virtues (Freedman, 2002). The impure and often grimy atmosphere of women’s everyday work lives was segregated from the delicate home sphere: she must present a clean and smiling face, dote upon her
husband, and raise her children to behave according to societal norms (Freedman, 2002). Women continued to be viewed as weaker vessels who needed protection from temptation.

The tendency of women to link their main source of power and self-worth to this type of perceived femininity divided the feminist movement for much of the Progressive Era. Although many argued that women should be allowed to use these four virtues to impact the public sphere (especially around issues that affected the home, such as sanitation), others simply longed for political rights as equals to men. Many middle-class women were reluctant to claim “universal rights as citizens rather than particular rights as mothers” (Freedman, 2002, p. 4). The most extreme feminists “identified marriage as a primary instrument of women’s oppression,” which did not draw many mothers and homemakers to the cause (Schneir, 1972, xvii). Still, more and more middle-of-the-road women’s rights activists felt that they should be rewarded for the hard work they did at home or (at the very least) have the opportunity to be financially independent. The movement gained support and momentum.

Along with notions about capitalism and political rights, women also began objecting to constructing an identity based solely on the wants of men (Wilson, 2003). They couldn’t help but notice that most fashions were about attracting the male gaze. Manners and gender roles served oppressive tools to make women pleasing and subservient to men. Women activists began to recognize themselves as a natural human identity that should have the opportunity to develop independently from social structures put in place by men as well as equal rights under the law (Wilson, 2003).
The legal changes suffragettes hoped for began to take place at the beginning of the 20th century. In 1903, The National Women’s Trade Union League was formed to unionize women workers and support strikes in favor of better wages and working conditions for women (Jacoby, 1975). After a 70 year battle, American women finally gained the right to vote in 1920. On the surface this appeared to be a guarantee of upcoming legal equality, but changing the mindset of a patriarchal nation would prove much more challenging. In 1923, Margaret Sanger began the American Birth Control League which eventually turned into Planned Parenthood (Kennedy, 1970). This was just the beginning of the reform of reproductive rights, one of the major disputes during the second wave of feminism.

**The Second Wave**

Many current educators were participants in the second wave of feminism during their college years; Mr. Brown probably drew much of his information about the movement from this time period. The 1960s brought about the women’s liberation movement which strove to draw women into the paid labor force. Women sought better paying jobs that were typically held by males. Expectations that women would both work and raise a family continued. Along with financial independence, women felt it even a greater necessity to control their reproductive rights. Second wave feminists wanted to emphasize the view that women could be equal to men in the workforce, but also different in terms of reproduction and sexuality (Freedman, 2002). Women wanted to be in control of their own bodies through safer child birth, treatment of venereal disease, abortion, and improved contraception (Shneir, xxii). No longer would sex and child bearing keep women of working age in the home unless this was a choice she made.
One of the biggest developments in terms of reproductive freedom came from the development of birth control pills which safeguarded against unwanted pregnancy. One of the unique features of the pill is that it allowed for complete female choice and privacy—women could take the pill without the knowledge of their partner, and therefore did not rely on their partner to cooperate in contraceptive efforts (PBS Online, 1999-2002). Despite the disapproval of the Catholic church and birth control being illegal in many states, the Food and Drug Administration approved contraceptive pills in 1960 (PBS Online, 1999-2002). This drug was in high demand—6.5 million American women were using it by 1965. The number nearly doubled by 1967 (PBS Online, 1999-2002).

In 1972, landmark Supreme Court decision Roe v. Wade ruled abortion legal based on a woman’s right to privacy (Finkelman and Urofsky, 2002). Throughout the United States, a woman, with her doctor, can choose to have an abortion during the early months of pregnancy without restriction (Finkelman and Urofsky, 2002). In the second two trimesters, abortion is legal only if the fetus is endangering the health of the mother (Finkelman and Urofsky, 2002). This groundbreaking decision allowed women to exercise reproductive freedom and truly plan their families (Freedman, 2002).

In 1961, President John F. Kennedy made Eleanor Roosevelt the chairwoman of the President’s Commission on the Status of Women, which was designed to find and expose discrimination against women (Freeman, 1973). The commission also “studied legislation and services that would help women to fulfill their roles, whether as housewives or as workers, and prompted legislative and executive actions.” (Leuchtenberg, n. d.) The commission found that women were discriminated against in almost every area of American life, which would hinder women’s ability to contribute
fully to the world around them (Leuchtenberg, n. d.). Recommendations made centered primarily on women in the work place, calling for affordable child care, paid maternity leave, and equal opportunity employment for women (Leuchtenberg, n.d.). After many of the commission’s findings were made public, debates raged over whether these types of legislative changes would aid women in obtaining high powered jobs or hinder female progress towards equal employment (Freeman, 1973). In response, President Kennedy denounced gender discrimination through passing the Equal Pay Act of 1963, which prohibits employers from discriminating “on the basis of sex by paying wages to employees... at a rate less than the rate (paid) to employees of the opposite sex... for equal work on jobs (requiring) equal skill, effort, and responsibility, and which are performed under similar working conditions” (United States Department of Labor, n. d.) In 1964, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act passed, which generally prohibited employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin (U.S. Equal Opportunity Employment Commission, n. d.).

Public education was recognized as another arena in which sex discrimination needed to be addressed. In 1972, Richard Nixon passed Title IX that bans sex discrimination in schools in academics, sports, or other extra-curricular activities (United States Department of Labor, n. d.). It has had the most influence in athletics and is often difficult to enforce—twenty two years later the Equity in Athletics Disclosure Act (EADA) required that all public academic institutions have financial information regarding athletic programs available upon request (U.S. Department of Education, n. d.).

The Equal Rights Amendment, which had been introduced in congress every year since 1923, was finally passed in 1972. It stated that “equality of rights under the law
shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex.” (Alice Paul Institute, n.d.) This same year, in her preface to *Feminism: Essential Historical Writings*, Miriam Schneir (1972) wrote: “millions of women… are slowly groping their way toward a feminist identity” (p. xxiii) Ironically, the failure of the states to ratify this amendment within the allotted time frame fractured feminist identity more than ever before, leading into the third wave of feminism.

**The Third Wave**

After the Equal Rights Amendment in the constitution failed to be ratified by the state legislatures by 1982, there was a revival of second wave feminism. With many attacks on abortion rights, these women sought to continue striving for *de jure* and *de facto* right for women (Freedman, 2002). There was also a conservative backlash against second wave feminists, including (1) feminazi critique which claimed that second wave feminists had taken equal rights overboard and were in fact depriving men of their rights, and (2) the post-feminist critique which claims that the feminist causes is dead; women have all the tools to gain legal equality and need to embrace their historical place in society (hooks, 1993; Purvis, 2002). I write more extensively on how these critiques have progressed in the following section.

At the same time as these three viewpoints, third wave feminism arose. The idea that social practices, not only biology, construct notions of sex as well as gender became prevalent (Butler, 2006). Queer theory and the call for equal rights for people with different sexual preferences emerged. Ultimately, third wave feminists had little interest in the Equal Rights Amendment because of this shift in interest. Second wave feminists criticize the third generation, saying that this form of feminism is an apolitical and
individually focused movement that addresses issues surrounding personal notions of sexuality (Purvis, 2002). Because the feminist cause was previously championed by upper and middle-class white women, third wavers often label second generation feminism “rigid, monolithic, tyrannical, (and) racist” (Purvis, 2002, p. 95).

One unique focus of third generation feminists was to focus on resisting popular notions of what is “good” and “right” and “beautiful” (Butler, 1993). Many third wave feminists chose to critique society by exhibiting a physical appearance that shocks older generations, including extreme tattoos and piercing (Jeffreys, 2000). This aspect of feminism was not present in Mr. Brown’s field experience class—girls wearing short shorts and other clothes inconsistent with fashion norms were automatically labeled “slutty” or “bad.”

Another common form of resistance was the public acknowledgement that many women are turned on by pornographic images to disrupt traditional ideas of how females should behave. Many also lobby for the rights of female sex workers. Third wave feminists used these things to “protest the invisibility, suppression, and political uses of difference” (Purvis, 2002, p. 97). By this interpretation, third wave feminists are making a political statement—not one that deals directly with changing legislation, but challenging traditional thought processes (Jeffreys, 2000).

Third wave feminists often seem extreme, but continue to work towards liberation. They acknowledge the fact that any attempt to move toward a blanket feminism that encompasses and unifies all women will ultimately be self-defeating (hooks, 1990; Kinser, 2004). Feminism has to encompass multiple perspectives and experiences—it is a global cause (hooks, 1990; Mack-Canty, 2002). In light of this, third
Wave feminists focus more on self-esteem and having the freedom to choose. Many feminists go so far as to say that it does not even really matter what people choose, only that they feel that they have the option to do so (Valenti, 2007). In the same vein of choice, third wave feminists reject the idea of political overthrow; instead, they seek to blur the lines between oppressors and oppressed, self and other, ugly and beautiful (Purvis, 2002, p. 100). In my education class, Mr. Brown took away female student’s right to choose and reinforced ideas of ugly and beautiful when he reproduced his ideas about girl’s clothing—if a girl tries to choose clothing outside of the norm, her education is at stake because she will have labeled herself as promiscuous and a threat to male teaching staff.

**A Comment about Conservative “Feminism”**

Neoconservative backlash to feminism really took hold in the early 1990s. Many conservative women express a desire to return to an idealized past that placed women in the home, and positioned husbands as protectors and providers. They claimed that feminism was too successful; men need to take control back from these aggressive women. Katherine Kersten (1991) states in a conservative feminism manifesto that liberal feminism “often seems a chip on the shoulder disguised as a philosophy; an excuse to blame others for personal failures; a misguided conviction that rage is the proper response to a society that--try as it might--can't seem to arrange things so that everyone "gets it all"” (par. 2). In this manifesto, she also calls for a reemphasis on the traditional family unit:

Contemporary feminists deplore the feminization of poverty, but they tend to see the answer solely in terms of increasing government spending, rather than in terms of encouraging behavior that would stabilize and strengthen the traditional family. After all, to acknowledge that marriage is women’s best defense against poverty and despair,
or that two-parent families generally serve children better than one-parent families do, is to admit that women need men more than fish need bicycles. Yet despite many feminists' reluctance to face this fact, 25 years of failed government programs seem to prove unequivocally to most observers that Uncle Sam can't fill Dad's shoes (Kersten, 1991, par. 80).

Along with the assertion that feminism has accomplished its goals, neoconservatives claim that racism is over, minorities are taking jobs from the white minority, and that people who are unemployed choose to be unemployed. Author bell hooks notes that neoconservatives “promote a perverse vision of freedom that makes it synonymous with materialism. They teach us to believe that domination is “natural,” that it is right for the strong to rule over the weak, the powerful over the powerless” (hooks, 1993, p 7). Henry A. Giroux (2009) writes that neoconservative materialism and free market economy take away from the sense of social responsibility necessary for thinking critically about the constructs that replicate inequality, making it “socially acceptable to blame the poor, homeless, uninsured, jobless, and other disadvantaged individuals and groups for their problems” (p. 2). These are not new ideas. In Martin Luther King’s speech Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break the Silence, he noted that “we must rapidly begin the shift from being a “thing”-oriented society to a “person”-oriented society… A civilization can flounder as readily in the face of moral and spiritual bankruptcy as it can through financial bankruptcy” (King, 1967, p.7). Neoconservative feminism emphasizes things by lauding the free market economy, citing history for examples of the market is a liberating force:

Indeed, the conservative feminist knows that capitalism and the market, with their dynamism, flexibility, and appetite for innovation, are among the most powerful tools that women have in their quest for autonomy and prosperity. Capitalism, after all, got women off the farm and out of the house. (Kersten, 1991, par. 63)
Conservative feminists also took aim at Roe v. Wade, insisting that women were becoming too sexually liberated and indiscriminant about their sex partners. Conservative feminists call out to other women, saying that encouraging women to have sex when they want with who they want is a mistake that hinders their economic progress: “we know now that sex of this sort has led to an epidemic of abortions, venereal disease, and female infertility; a host of unwanted children; and a sorry legacy of educations and careers--women's, not men's--cut short” (Kersten, 1991, par. 76).

Lastly, neoconservative feminists think that it is a women’s duty to use her resourcefulness to succeed within the current system or to be quiet. Men should not be bothered with female problems like equal wage or employment opportunities; they should simply continue performing their manly roles in society:

The conservative feminist does not wish her sons to grow up believing that, by virtue of being male, they are guilty of the oppression of women. Nor does she wish them to affect to be more ”caring” than the next man in a demeaning effort to impress women who condemn them for the fact of their manhood” (Kersten, p.1991, par. 49).

This conservative feminist movement has been gaining momentum since its inception in the 1990s. Conservatives like Sarah Palin try to rally women around issues of anti-abortion, claiming it empowers women by telling them that they’re “strong enough and smart enough, they are capable to be able to handle an unintended pregnancy and still be able to . . . handle that [and] give that child life” (Valenti, 2010, par. 5). She does this by taking away their right to choose. Palin uses the language of the feminist movement to inspire women, while gutting the movement by subverting these words, rendering them meaningless (Valenti, 2010). In the words of blogger Kate Hardy (2010), “in a series that begins with "anti-choice feminism," "Tea Party feminism," and "Sarah
Palin feminism," what comes next? "Phyllis Schlafly feminism?" "Patriarchal feminism?"
"He-Man Woman Hater Feminism?" (par.4)

At the same time, people who have made their living dolling out conservative
hype as radio hosts and TV evangelists continue to slander the feminist movement to
droves of rapt listeners and dedicated followers. In 2005, Rush Limbaugh in his
broadcast 35 Undeniable Truths of Life, the number sixteen truth was "Women should
not be allowed on juries where the accused is a stud," and truth 24 stated "the feminist
movement was created to allow ugly women access to the mainstream of society" (Media
Matters, 2005, par. 1). In 1992, extremist Pat Robertson wrote in a fundraising letter
about the equal rights amendment in Iowa stating “feminism is a socialist, anti-family,
political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children,
practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism, and become lesbians” (Media Matters, 2005 par.
17) In 2011, Robertson is still on the air expressing his conservative anti-woman
comments—earlier this year he was noted to say the democrats supported a “culture of
death” because they were all for “‘killing babies” (RWWBlog, 2011, 0:14-0:20). Why
would democrats support abortion? To make lesbians feel better about not being able to
have children, of course: “if these married women can’t have children—if they abort their
babies—then it kind of puts them on a level playing field” (RWWBlog, 2011, 0:45-0:56).
In my view, though conservative feminism is a popular term, it is not feminism at all.
Conservative feminists neglect to present any structural critiques of society and accept
life within the current patriarchal system, which is the antithesis of feminism.

There are issues with liberal feminism as previously presented as well—feminism
cannot exist in a white, middle-class vacuum. Logically, there are females of every race,
class, culture. The next section takes a closer look at some of the third wave feminist critiques.

**Race and Class are not Constant Variables Running Parallel to Feminism**

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, scholars began pointing to the liberal view of feminism as more limiting than liberating. Theoretical work tended to consider discrimination only as occurring along a single axis and use all other variables as constants—black men are most commonly seen as the objects of racism, white women sexism (Crenshaw, 1989). Targeting the most privileged members of these two groups (those not complicated by more than one discriminatory category), may make research simple, but also distorts and limits available information about sexism and racism (Crenshaw, 1989). Furthermore, “viewing race simply as an independent variable assumes that other variables act the same on women of different races and that women’s relationship to feminism, no matter what their race, can be measured by the same set of variables” (Harnois, 2005, p. 810). Women of different races come to feminism for different reasons. Even the basic definition of feminism differs between people of different races (Harnois, 2005).

Author bell hooks points out in her article *Feminism: A Movement to End Sexist Oppression* (1987) that the general definition of feminism, which calls for female equality to men, is problematic. She eloquently states:

> Women in lower-class and poor groups, particularly those who are non-white, would not have defined women’s liberation as women gaining social equality with men since they are continually reminded in their everyday lives that all women do not share a common social status. Concurrently, they know that many males in their social groups are exploited and oppressed. Knowing that men in their groups do not have social, political, and economic power, they would not deem it liberatory to share their social status (hooks, 238).
This also limits feminism, by the very definition, to a pursuit of upper and middle class white women.

Hooks (2003) notes that those people who are part of subordinated groups often create communities with those who are dominated in similar ways by social structures (p. 73). Bonding through “shared negative beliefs and understandings about oppressors,” they create a collective identity vested in the idea that they are a repressed people, thereby reinforcing the power of those who dominate (hooks, 2003, p. 73). In this way, people “lose sight not only of their strength to resist but of the possibility that they can intervene and change the perspective of those in power.” (hooks, 2003, p. 73)

Indeed, hooks also notes that in many of the gender studies classes that she has taught, black students feel both isolated and uncomfortable (hooks, 1990, p. 29). They reject feminism because they are reluctant to identify themselves as part of another repressed group. They are afraid of how feminist politics might change “the ways they find themselves related to fathers, lovers, and friends” (hooks, 1990, p. 29). Despite this discomfort, identifying with the female cause is important to the formation of identity and collective consciousness.

How can a feminist movement begin that encompasses all women? Instead of using binaries and opposition to define the feminist cause, hooks names feminism “the struggle to end sexist oppression” that does not privilege some women over other women (hooks, 1987, p. 240). Feminism should bring women together to tell their own individual stories and battles with oppression. Through this, centralized themes will emerge that allow for a deeper understanding of the status of women and gender oppression in the United States (hooks, 1987).
Post-Structuralism

Post-structuralism is a key component to my understanding of what it means to be a feminist, in that it is the acknowledgement that meanings and categories are unstable due to conscious and subconscious mimicking of messages received from prevailing social structures (Peters and Burbules, 2004). This requires a reexamination and dismantling of the concept absolute truth, which stems from false binaries created by humans to help organize and order the world (Derrida, 1978; Peters and Burbules, 2004). The labels we use and consider "normal" or “natural” (like developmental stages or gender) are in fact neither necessary nor rigid, but a construct of the society we live in (Butler, 2006; Ezzell, 2009; Pomerantz, 2009).

This lens serves to further complicate and deconstruct the ideas presented by a liberal history of feminism. Movements made by first and second wave feminists assumed a heterosexual norm which simply sets up new hierarchy, complete with exclusions and power differentials (Butler, 2006). Also, when considering ethnicity and social class, gender itself is no longer a clear or stable term (Davis, 1983; hooks, 1987). It is another binary, requiring people to either be “male” or “female,” or, due to the phallogocentric nature of the English language, “self” and “other” (Butler, 2006). The woman cannot exist without the man, the man without the woman. This is not to say that one is submissive to the other on the basis of this binary, only that they are viewed and presented as being diametrically opposed and therefore cause each other’s continuation (Derrida, 1978).

Furthermore, because an author is automatically assumed to be male, a female author feels the necessity to label herself and change language to reflect her gender. In
this way, woman becomes unfairly associated with her physical being, her body.

According to Judith Butler, author of *Gender Trouble*, English language construction leaves female’s identity helplessly tied to a disavowed body, while males are able to be complete, bodiless beings (Butler, 2006, p. 16). She must either be defined as “other” or be unacknowledged, silent.

I was first introduced to the idea that structures put in place to help liberate women actually aide in the continuation of forming female identity within the confines of a masculine signifying economy when reading Butler’s (2006) work. Not only are males presented as the main people in control of sexuality and sexual relationships, phallogocentric language makes it impossible for women to negotiate new power relationships (Butler, 2006). The quest for liberation (as it is currently defined) can only function within given power relationships. With language as it currently exists, females do not have agency or power to determine their relationships to others.

Because of this reality, it is difficult to write with authentic voice. “I” necessarily represents a gendered point of view—it is impossible to write from outside this male-centered system, and equally unfeasible to be completely genuine from within its confines (Butler, 2006). Acknowledging gender at all means to be an accepting subordinate in heterosexual society—it is impossible to escape, but it should be accepted that there are gender possibilities other than “male” or “female” (Butler, 2006). Although sex may not be real on a fundamental level, it is a reality recognized in this paper because the distinction between male and female is a central (though problematic) feature of American culture.
Butler does not specifically examine female athletes in *Gender Trouble*, but her theoretical framework applies to all aspects of society, including Title IX. This seems especially pertinent when examining subjects—all identify themselves as female athletes—who situated themselves within the traditionally male world of school sports. They continually sought ways to reestablish their femininity, through clothing and other practices.

**Post-Structuralism, School, and Sexual Education**

Most of what I discussed with subjects did not deal specifically with what was overtly taught in the classroom, but in my view education includes everything that takes place on school grounds. Socioeconomic status, race, family structure, gender, and history all play into establishing their identity and learning about what they need to do to become who they want to be within this rural school community (Griffen, 2001). Their desire to perform the role 7th grade female athlete as they understood it permeated every interview despite their continual insistence that they were basing decisions solely on personal preference. Through close observation, it became clear that the emancipatory system for females created under Title IX, school sponsored female athletics, was both creating and restraining these subjects as they strove to form their identity (Griffen, 2001). Their clothing was a key component to testing themselves and their own normalcy (Am I a small enough size? Tan enough? Does my body look similar to the model’s body in the fashionable styles?) as well as indicating to others that they were “good” girls (Fox, 1977).

School, by nature, has a political purpose and authoritarian elements. The institution itself has overarching goals: preparing students for the work force, to be
democratic, to respect authority. Part of this is teaching students what kind of clothing is appropriate for school, dictated through the school dress code (Pomerantz, 2007). Schools are a place to “identify, civilize, and contain what is considered uncontrollable” (Fine, 1998, p. 169). The teachers have one simple objective: to guide students through educational experiences that will lead them to similar beliefs as their instructor (an individual culled by the educational system and specifically chosen not only on their academic merit but by the hiring school because they “mesh” with the school mission statement and other individuals who teach there). Although this concept makes me uncomfortable because of its implication about what it means to be a teacher—it seems very egocentric and like an advantageous abuse of the malleability of young minds—it is also difficult to deny this truth. A teacher also reaffirms the conservative norms in terms of dress by wearing “teacher clothes” in the workplace— it would be extremely difficult to get a teaching job having not learned the correct business casual etiquette of the profession (a concept stressed by many university career services departments).

In the article “Sexuality, Schooling, and Adolescent Females: The Missing Discourse of Desire,” Michelle Fine (1998) applies post-structural concepts specifically to female sexuality within the school setting. Female sexuality is frequently overlooked due to a fear of destructing family values by promoting promiscuity and immortality. Females are continually presented as subjects—they are taught that they should constantly guard themselves from sexual advances lest they be “taken advantage of” and become a victim. Being a victim could mean being labeled “easy,” getting dumped by a boyfriend (no longer having this feminine secret to wield, they become undesirable), contracting an STD, or becoming pregnant out of wedlock. In Fine’s (1998) own words,
“the authorized sexual discourses define what is safe, what is taboo, and what will be silenced…. What results is a discourse of sexuality based on the male in search of desire and the female in search of protection” (p. 179).

These statements ultimately lead me back to one of Butler’s overarching questions about sex and gender: “How do certain sexual practices compel the questions: what is a woman, what is a man” (Butler, 2006, p. x)? Fine begins to examine these questions through four different discourses that exist within the public school setting—three of which emphasize the consequences of sexual activity and present women as subjects in the sexual experience.

The first discourse—named by Fine (1998) as “sexuality as violence”—scares female students by teaching about abuse in teen relationships, STDs, and incest (p.169). Its main assumption is that by instilling a negative way of thinking about sex in students, they will be able to decrease sexual activity. No evidence has been provided to substantiate this claim (Fine, 1998, p. 169). In fact, because students are not provided with adequate information about contraception, it is less likely that students will take responsibility for their sexual behaviors.

Sexuality as victimization, the second discourse, offers no space for female agency or sexuality (Fine, 1998, p. 168). Females are simply represented as objects and potential victims of male desire. Males are consistently viewed as dangerous predators; their main goal is to coerce or (if they are given the opportunity) even steal a sexual experience from the female. Females are taught to be extremely guarded and untrusting of males, lest they steal their innocence and primary worth (their virginity, their marriage bargaining chip). Once a female enters into a marriage relationship, their husband
changes from threat to primary protector—once the couple has been recognized as such by the government (and, more than likely, blessed by the church) the male is allowed to act out his sexual desires on his wife (Fine, 1998, p. 170).

The third discourse offered, sexuality as individual morality, emphasizes the importance of female strength as decision-making, so long as she’s hearty enough to maintain premarital abstinence (Fine, 1998, p. 170-171). This kind of discourse is prominent in communities where it is believed that teaching about female sexuality and contraception is to take a stand against the family unit. Sexuality is presented as an exercise in self-control for females, because males are unable to control their sexual urges.

The discourse of desire presented by Fine (1998) is defined as “a discourse… in which young women have a voice would be informed and generated out of their own socially constructed sexual meanings” instead of dictated by the first three discourses (p. 173). It is different in that it actually acknowledges female pleasures and sexual entitlement. Sadly, this discourse is absent from most public sexual education settings.

The discourse of desire is not completely absent from the female experience, but does not take place within tangible, planned curriculum. It happens through conversations with peers, family members, and teachers: “their struggle to untangle issues of gender, power, and sexuality underscores the fact that, for them, notions of sexual negotiation cannot be separated from sacrifice and nurturance” (Fine, 1998, p.173). Because of this, “the adolescent female rarely reflects simply on sexuality[,] her sense of sexuality is informed by peers, culture, religion, violence, history, passion, authority, rebellion, body, past and future, gender and ration relations of power” (Fine,
1998, p. 173). How do these four discourses inform ideas about female clothing choices in a middle school setting? A girl’s clothing is often viewed as an expression of sexuality; it is influenced and regulated by all the same factors: “whether in a classroom, on the street, at work, or at home, the adolescent female’s sexuality is negotiated by, for, and despite the young woman herself (Fine, 1998, p.174).” The first three discourses prevalent in sexual education curriculums can also be found within the normalizing discourse of the school dress code itself, which “identifies, civilizes, and contains” girls in the same way (Fine, 1998, p. 169). This is discussed further in chapter five of this paper, *Analysis: Dress Code*.

**Identity**

Identity is defined as meanings one attributes to oneself that evoke meaning in the form of responses from others (Ferrari, 1998; Ezzell, 2009). However, identity is not fixed, but is a consequence of interaction and reflection (Ferrari, 1998; Wood, 2000). Bruner and Kalmar (1998) state that “while the experienced world may produce Self, Self also produces the experienced world,” suggesting that Self is constructive, and largely interpretive (p. 322). Identities continuously change, and can be consciously worked on (Ezzell, 2009).

As discussed in the previous section about why the liberal view of feminism is too narrow, race, class, and gender are intertwining systems of oppression. Ezzell (2009) points out that these factors are essential to identity; they are the “social arrangements from which we derive our identities” (p. 11). It logically follows that identity creation is therefore part of the process by which inequality is reproduced. Individuals, and how they perceive themselves, ultimately uphold society’s large inequalities (Ferrari, 1998).
According to Driscoll (2002), youth is a “crucial point of cultural reproduction and cultural change” (p.10).

Specifically in the case of gender, surrounding societal structures “suggest forms or ‘rules’ for ‘doing’ gender, and children see the adults in their lives acting on these rules in more or less consistent ways” (Cherland, 1994, p. 33). Although gender is considered natural and innate, it also becomes “an important social accomplishment” to perform gender correctly for one’s age group (Cherland, 1994, 33). This is especially true in terms of clothing—gender and age is performed through the way people dress, serving as a series of signs that signal to others key facets and characteristics of self. Due to fashion and patriarchal values, many fashions for females are much more sexualized than practical male fashions. That is to say there is no reason that short shorts (or “apple-bottom” shorts) are popular for girls, while at the same time shorts below the knee are in style for boys. Society dictates these things as important indicators of gender thereby reproducing oppressive structures.

It is important also to consider how gender might be constructed differently based on the interpretive community or audience to which an individual presents (Fish, 1980). Metanarratives play a large role in the construction of self: “even the existence and meaning of memories sometimes depends on the negotiated support of others” (Brunner and Kalmar, 1998). Stories tend to closely adhere to how individuals feel they should be for a particular audience; they dress specifically for their audience as well. This highlights the importance of acknowledging myself as a key part of the narrative inquiry process—what part of their identity did the girls wish to present to me, a white, middle class, adult, female, aspiring teacher?
At the same time, the grand narratives—stories cultures tell themselves about their practices and beliefs to legitimize them—upheld by this community and structured by history are also important to consider when writing about the girls’ stories (Haber, 1994). Many grand narratives cause people to believe false cause and effect relationships; for example, if a girl wears the right clothes, the right makeup, and smiles, she will attract a husband. Or, in the case of Mr. Brown’s class, if a girl wears short shorts in school she’s trying to solicit sexual attention from her teachers. “To remain undisrupted, power structures require that individuals to believe and shape their identities around” grand narratives (Haber, 1994, p.8). The clothing adolescents choose to wear can often be seen as an example of these grand narratives and an indication that they are ingesting and embodying a culture of materialism. The ways that teachers and staff react to these clothing choices is often the product of a different grand narrative—creating space for prejudice and gross misunderstanding.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Purpose

The purpose of this research project is to examine how middle school girls use dress as a signifier of self during a critical period identity formation. More specifically, I looked at what societal and cultural structures influence clothing choice at this age. I conducted a series of open interviews during the three month period of December 2010 to February 2011 organized around the following pre-designated issues: (1) clothing and school dress code, (2) friend groups and social structure in school, (3) sexual education, and (4) popular culture. I hope that obtaining this information will aid educators in understanding the adolescent identity and illuminate what prominent modern stereotypes of girls this age are reinforced and represented through social, political, economic, and cultural practices.

Qualitative

I chose a qualitative approach for this study about adolescent girls, clothing, and identity formation because my goal is to seek “answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p. 8). I did not set out to discover causal relationships or generalizable statistics from a purely scientific standpoint, but to open a site of discussion about adolescent clothing choice and provide text as a site for reader/researcher interaction (Glense, 1999). Although clothing is an
everyday concern of adolescents, it is a complex topic that cannot be easily broken down in positivist terms. Through having subjects describe a part of their lives that they viewed as a natural expression of their teen normalcy, I hoped to gain some understanding into what constructed knowledge and rules influenced their identity within the school setting.

This research provides a narrative account of moments of conversations in the interview process as well as a montage of the images pertaining to clothing that subjects experience on a day-to-day basis. Through providing a multifaceted and urgent narrative, I hope to link my research “to the hopes, needs, goals, and promises” of democratic society (Creswell, 2005; Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p.8; Masny, 2005-2006; Endo, Reece-Miller, and Santavicca, 2010).

**Case Studies**

According to Stake (2000), “Case studies seek both what is common and what is particular about the case”—this is to say that case studies both refine theory and suggest complexities in a certain subject area while creating boundaries for generalization (p. 438). I chose to conduct a case study because my goal was to understand the problems, contexts, and modes of interpretation involved with how this particular group of white middle-class girls choose their clothing (Stake, 2000). Performing this case study involved situating the specific case itself in terms of location, economy, race, gender, historical influences, other cases and theories through which this case can be recognized, and the subjects themselves (Stake, 2000; Mitton-Kükner, 2010). Through studying this particular case closely, I hoped to experience subject’s multiple subjectivities first hand, showing their identities to be constantly progressing and changing through reflection and
interaction (Wood, 2000). That is not to say that these girls be considered an
authoritative perspective on girlhood—through reading this specific situated case, I hope
to teach readers what I have learned, and that they will modify and reevaluate their own
assumptions about gender, clothing, sexuality and schools (Stake, 2000; Masny, 2005-
2006).

**Narrative Inquiry**

Narration suited me as a researcher as someone who wants to be a secondary
English educator. I have long believed in the power of storytelling; creating
virtual/actual interaction through meaningful literacy events leads us to move beyond
what we have personally experienced (Masny, 2005-2006; Endo, Reece-Miller, and
Santavicca, 2010). In the words of Glense (1999), “the opportunity to learn about what
you cannot see and to explore alternative explanations of what you do see is the special
strength of interviewing in qualitative inquiry” (p. 69). Narration is also appropriate for
my topic in that it requires students to “re-story” the seemingly humdrum choices they
make on a daily basis about how they present themselves (Endo, Reece-Miller, and
Santavicca, 2010; Mitton-Kükner, Nelson and Desrochers, 2010).

Multiple narratives recorded on different days reaffirm and contradict each other
at the same time, highlighting how student identities and lives are continually shaped by
every day experiences (Haworth and Hickey-Moody, 2009; Wood, 2000). Student’s lives
are central to their learning process—ideas about their personal identity were not simply
placed in their minds at birth, but in some way must resonate with them personally
(Miton-Kükner, Nelson and Desrochers, 2010). Even so, students may consider many of
their clothing choices a “natural” signifier or extension of an autonomous self (Olssen,
2005). Because of this, when interviewing I asked the girls to simply explain and reflect on their clothing choices, as well as how they thought they were perceived by others within a school setting. I strive to use the subject’s own words wherever possible to let speak for themselves (as shown, all six subjects were quite capable of expressing intelligent and critical opinions), to allow the reader to experience data as I did, and to authenticate my analysis (Wood, 2000).

**Open Interviewing**

My story became intertwined with the stories of these six girls throughout the course of the interview process—we were not simply interacting within the confines of time, space, personalities, and social rules, but having an effect on each other as we interacted (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Clandinin and Huber, 2002).

I chose to conduct open interviews, using the questions as a starting point for inquiry. Open interviews are a conversational style of interview that provide more genuine data and help the researcher understand local context. As in a job interview, the participant can choose what information they would like to reveal about themselves and can direct the interview to some degree (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). There is a great deal of support for this kind of interview in modern research because it gives the participant their own voice (Arminio, Torres, and Jones, 2006; Fine, 1994; Heyink and Tymstra, 1993).

The interviews were organized around the following generative themes:

1. **Clothing and School Dress Code**
   - How do you choose your clothing?
   - Who buys your clothing?
- How do you know what is stylish?
- How does what you wear reflect who you are?
- Do you think people judge you based on what you wear? What do peers think? Teachers? Parents? Whose opinion matters the most to you?
- Do you wear anything you know your parents or other adults disapprove of? Why do you wear it? Why do they disapprove of it?
- What is the school dress code? Is it fair? Do you follow it? Is it more geared towards one gender than the other?

2. Sex Education

- When was the last time you were in a sex education class?
- Was it informative? What kinds of things did you learn about?
- Did you feel like boys and girls were treated the same in this class? Were expectations/responsibilities the same for both groups?
- Did the information given to you feel modern or dated?
- Does clothing relate in any way to dating? How would you dress for a school dance, date, or co-ed social situation?

3. Friend Groups and Social Structure in School

- Do you tend to wear the same kinds clothing as your friends?
- Do different groups tend to wear different things? What are these groups?
• How are these different groups perceived based on what they wear? Are there things students can see that adults cannot?
• If there was a “new kid” in school, could you tell if they were cool or not based on what they were wearing?

4. Popular Culture

• What TV shows do you like to watch? What do you think about the characters/scenarios/clothing? Do you align yourself with any specific character?
• What magazines do you read? What kinds of information do you get from these magazines?

I also asked them to describe their interviewing partner at the end of each interview, to see if this was consistent with the questions that I asked.

Equipment

I used a digital audio recording device to record each interview. I also brought a list of possible questions for the interview, and a notebook to take notes immediately afterwards. All research materials were kept confidential and in a locked cabinet when I did not have them on my person. Names of the students and school have been changed to protect the privacy of the subjects.

Coding

Having completed all twelve interviews, I began transcribing them in March 2011. I took a grounded approach to my analysis, choosing to see what themes emerged from the interviews themselves instead of seeking to find an answer to a specific question (Stake, 2000). Using different colored highlighters, I coded transcripts for data reduction,
and to “identify or mark specific themes within the text” (Bernard and Ryan, 2000, p. 781). Specifically, I coded for (1) clothing choice and friend groups (2) dating and sexuality, and (3) pop culture; elements of all three were present in every interview, regardless of interview theme. Through this process, I began to explore “when, why, and under what conditions […] these themes occurred in the text (Bernard and Ryan, 2000, p. 783). The analysis section is broken into two chapters focusing on related themes in subject’s narration: (1) Belonging, which discusses the girls using clothing as a barrier to define gender normalcy and age appropriateness, and (2) Dress Code, which explores the underlying messages of the school dress code and where they are reinforced elsewhere in the subject’s lives.
CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS: BELONGING

MS Community and School

On my first day, I drove the ten minutes along the river to MS Middle School, which was nestled between the base of the bluffs and the river. The school served both the small town of MS, about 5,000 people, and a tiny neighboring community of about six hundred people. Most of the residents of MS commute out of this rural, agricultural setting to work in a nearby city which offers many jobs in the medical field, grocery supply business, and industry. The town of MS is known for, and shows great pride in, their apples, sweet corn, and pumpkins. The population is almost entirely white (protected website, 2011). MS has a very low crime rate. About half of the population of MS makes more money than the Minnesota state average (protected website, 2011). The value of homes is fifteen percent lower than the state average (protected website, 2011).

The school grounds were open and expansive. MS Middle School had a small playground on one side (mainly a softball diamond and some crab grass). I pulled into the staff parking lot of the brick building and was surprised by the new brick and wide LMC windows. The new school building encompassed both middle school and high school—it was large and spacious. Walking in, the hallways were clean and quiet. The school secretary questioned me thoroughly and aggressively tried to stick a name tag on me—clearly she took her job seriously.
When I approached the teacher I worked with about helping me with my study, she was excited. She told me that the principal liked it when people conducted research at the school—he strongly believed that education is an evolving field and schools needed to be studied in order to improve. He was trying many innovative practices (devoting time to professional learning communities each day, creating data driven interventions for specific students, and focusing specifically on quantitative data to drive instructional decisions). I got the impression that he was proud of his school and the efforts they were making towards education. Together, we wrote an email that included a copy of my IRB. I had a letter of approval on letterhead that same week. The school seemed very open to research.

Though students insisted on their own autonomy throughout the course of the study, they were “living their lives in circumstances which were not of their own choosing, and the symbolic value attached to dress style was part of the localized cultural knowledge and attitudes within the surrounding community” (Swain, 2002, p.55). It is important to recall the community where these girls live. Also, keep in mind that whenever I write about gender or femininity in terms of the subjects interviewed, I am writing about white, middle class gender or femininity because of the demographic makeup of the school (hooks, 1987; Harnois, 2005).

The Sporty Group

According to Wooten (2006), teens join cliques for “ego protection, status achievement, and identity formation (p. 199).” All six subjects presented themselves as members of the “sporty” group, although this did not mean they were all participating members of a particular team or even any team. Gendered heterosexual norms,
identification as athletes, and performing well in school were all important aspects of their identity as a group and individually. Generally speaking, they were outgoing and tried to perform according to school rules and regulations. They were well-liked by their peers and school staff.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sports Played</th>
<th>Other Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shakira</td>
<td>Basketball, Dance, Cross Country</td>
<td>A leader, small, lively, well-liked, outspoken, definite positions on moral issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>Soccer, Basketball, Softball</td>
<td>A leader, serious athlete, looks up to older siblings, perceptive, competitive, in a long term relationship (4 months)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agnes</td>
<td>Soccer, Basketball, Softball</td>
<td>Giggly, wants everyone to get along, serious athlete, fun, sweet, closest with Lucy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francesca</td>
<td>Basketball, Cross Country</td>
<td>Tall and mature in appearance, self-conscious, newer member to the clique, close with her family, reflective, closest with Shakira</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barb</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Giggly, awkward, often avoids talking about uncomfortable subjects, self-conscious, well-liked by boys but generally disinterested</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patty</td>
<td>Soccer, Basketball, Softball</td>
<td>Quiet, straight forward, competitive, comfortable, lives in a different part of town from her friends, close with her family</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Impressions and Descriptions of Subjects

Subjects were very excited about the prospect of choosing their own replacement names for the purpose of the study—it is clear from the names they picked that they liked the idea of presenting an exotic or sometimes a funny version of self. Despite the fact that subjects knew their identity would be kept anonymous, they still believed that this
study might in some way lead to their discovery and gain celebrity status. This may have affected some of the answers they gave during the interviewing process. All girls were twelve or thirteen years of age.

Within this friendship group, girls used clothing “to make their allegiance known and to construct boundaries around friendship circles” (Finders, 1997, p.23). They wore the same types of clothes, shopped at certain stores, and wore specific brands. Subjects said they could pigeonhole new students in what group they belonged in based on their clothing alone (Danesi, 1994). Although they claimed to “welcome” all new students (“especially if they look cool”), no one new had been allowed to join the group this year. There was one student who insisted on sitting at their lunch table— the girls said “she didn’t belong anywhere”—but she wore this “weird pink fleece” and was deemed overly talkative and un-athletic despite her participation in two school sports.

Despite this exclusivity, the girls continually reiterated that they were the “normal girls” in the school, and that they did and wore what they “felt like.” Although subjects believed they were capable of reflecting “independently and critically upon basic commitments, desires and beliefs, be they chosen or unchosen, and to enjoy a range of meaningful life options from which to choose, upon which to act, and around which to orientate and pursue one’s life projects,” these girls were not nearly as autonomous as they believed (Reich, 2002, p. 46). The “normalizing discourse […] internalized from the larger culture” makes statements about clothing, normalcy, and choice extremely problematic (Finders, 1997, p. 18). Running alongside this normalizing discourse was the concept of naturalness— subjects also assumed what they wore was simply a natural
exhibition of their true self in terms of gender and age, embedded at birth and completely independent from societal influences (Olssen, 2005, p. 366; Butler, 2006).

The next section focuses on this idea of choice and what subjects themselves were most keen to explicitly highlight during the interviews—who they are NOT within the school setting. There are two different types of people the sporty group wanted to distance/other—tolerable groups (those who bought into a similar concept of normalcy and had similar middle-class economic status), and intolerable groups (those who had no chance of becoming normal, and had less money than many of their classmates).

**Who the Girls are Not: The Defensive Othering of Tolerable Groups**

Subjects own accounts of the social structures within the school identified three “good” girl groups (I will write about “bad groups” in the next section): sporty group, dancers, and the goody/art group. These three groups interacted with each other daily at school due to seating charts and assigned group projects, but did not usually spend time with together outside of classes. The three groups had different reputations in terms of dress, performance in school and dating rules. While interviewing, I noticed that subjects in the sporty group tended to stereotype girls in the other groups according to dominant norms even though they were more similar than different (Schwalbe, 2000; Ezzell, 2009). This practice is known as defensive othering.

Although girls in the sporty group talked to classmates in the dancer group at school, they viewed the dancers as being too “girly.” When I asked what this meant, they said two key characteristics of the dancers were that they wore makeup and short shorts, presenting a hyper feminized image that was fashionable but viewed by subjects as a little bit too high maintenance for “normal” seventh grade girls and done only in the interest of
attracting boys. Dancers “did okay” in school but it was not their top priority—they usually tried to stay out of sight in the classroom and get by with little teacher attention. Dancers devoted time to following teenage heart throbs, among them Justin Bieber and characters from the Twilight series. They had crushes on male athletes in the grade, flirted from a far by attending their crush’s sporting events, and often “went out” with them via Facebook and texting. According to subjects, dancers had little interactions with their boyfriends outside of electronic mediums.

Although girls in the sporty group occasionally talked to classmates in the goody/art group at school, goody/art girls were described as being academically focused, droll, and overly competitive. Subjects claimed that these girls often saw themselves as better than everyone else, even though they were boring and out of touch with what it meant to be a teenager. According to the sport group, Goody/art girls tended to choose clothes that were either much too old (matronly) or too young for seventh grade—they were not displaying their femininity in a way consistent with being a normal teenager. Goody/art girls consistently received top grades in their classes. They sometimes dated within their own group, but were not typically considered desirable by the popular male athletic group.

While members of the sporty group claimed these characteristics as definitional and unique to other groups, they possessed many of the same attributes as the dancers and the goody/art group. Many of the girls in the sporty group wore makeup. Two of the six had been asked to change into their gym clothes because their short shorts were out of dress code. Also, most of the girls in the sporty group were high achieving students—many of them received straight As. From the way many of them talked about their
behavior in the classroom, citing specific grades and percentages, it was clear that they were academically competitive as well.

Girls in the sporty group felt the need to defensively other these two groups to maintain their position of “best” and “most normal” within the school, thereby positioning themselves closer to and perpetuating the dominant norm (Schwalbe 2000; Ezzell, 2009). Sporty girls classifying dancers and goody/art girls in terms of their gender appropriateness as dictated by a white male majority, and their age appropriateness as dictated by consumer markets aimed at selling clothes to this particular age group. Although sporty girls had many of the same characteristics as the dancer group, they perpetuated the stereotypes of the dancers being ditzy and boy crazy by declaring that the dancers’ main focus was attracting male attention through feminine dress only appropriate for older girls. The sporty group asserted that they were better because they chose to play sports, be competitive, and use sports as a medium to talk to the boys they went out with. The sporty group also defensively othered girls in the goody/art group. The sporty group perpetuated the stereotype of girls who do well in school being too nerdy, asexual, and undesirable. This time, the sporty group claimed that they were better because they chose to play sports, present themselves in a feminine way, and could date male athletes. Labeling was about gaining distance from a group of students who liked things considered unpopular (like art or Pokémon) and also unfeminine. Labeling and ridiculing other females in the grade “facilitates the socialization of embarrassment and the acquisition and maintenance of community norms”—the girls used clothing and defensive othering to assert their age and gender in the most normal way they knew how (Wooten, 2006).
Who the Girls are Not: Ignoring “Weird” or Intolerable Groups

These three groups were not the only ones labeled in the 7th grade class. If members of the sporty group were assigned seats next to students labeled as “goth,” “emo,” or “loner” they would speak to them as little as possible. Subjects perceived these as “angry,” “bad,” and “scary.” One even said that this group (lumped together as “troublesome”) had “given up on life.” She then gave a full report of a tall eighth grader in a black trench coat and black combat boots entering the building before classes started while slugging off of a Mountain Dew Voltage two liter, “probably to like, get high, or something.” Where these students really as dangerous as subjects reported?

Students in this “troublesome” group wore black clothing from Hot Topic, tee shirts depicting their favorite cartoon and video game characters (Family Guy and Super Mario Brothers), and “brightly colored skinny jeans.” Although subjects claimed not to know what this group did in their free time, they noted that troublesome kids lived and hung out in the “creepy” part of town which was poorer and had many apartment complexes. Because their families were less affluent, they were left out of the “good groups” by “a marketing blitz aim[ed] to define children in terms of economic potential” (Giroux, 2009, p. 49). Students whose families have disposable income to buy products are privileged in society by gaining membership into “good groups” at school. Giroux’s critique of the neoliberal youth culture perpetuated by America’s consumer culture closely aligns with subject perceptions of themselves in opposition to this troublesome group: “youth are now viewed either as consumers, on the one hand, or troubling, reckless, or and dangerous persons on the other” (Giroux, 2009, p.3). A student with a troublesome label is treated differently by faculty and peers—more heavily disciplined
because it is assumed they have a bad attitude about learning and towards adults, and under heavy surveillance because of their reputation for graffiti and smoking. Mr. Brown’s teaching about girls and sexuality is consistent with this; clothing indicates behavior.

**Reported Ways The Sporty Group Chooses their Clothing**

In contrast to their “troublesome” classmates, girls in the sporty group strove to identify themselves as “normal” teens through what they wore—many of them looked to their older sisters for examples of what to buy. They also relied on input from their friends. They said that they tried to buy unique clothing that most other people wouldn’t be wearing, and that they didn’t really go off of what was “cool” or popular. They view themselves as autonomous individuals; making choices about clothing based solely on personal preference. Even so, their parents (usually their mom) purchased all of their clothing, and because of this what they wore was contingent on price and negotiated style between parent and adolescent.

Francesca: I don’t really go off of what’s cool, I just see if there’s something that I like then I buy it.
Shakira: That’s nice, and cheap…. well, good price, not like extremely cheap.
Francesca: Yeah.

After this exchange, they struggled to name what a “good price” for a specific item would be—clearly because their parents were paying, a “good price” was determined by the buyer. Girls also said that they never wore items of clothing that their parents disapproved of, they were never asked to change before they left the house. Some of the girls said that they let their mother’s shop for them while they were at school if they needed something new. They trusted their moms to make clothing choices for them.
When I asked subjects how they chose their clothing on a day to day basis, they presented a nonchalant view of their morning routine. They claimed to focus mainly on making practical choices; their main considerations centered on wearing things that were:

1. Clean
   Lucy: … If it’s clean, I’ll wear it.

2. Weather appropriate
   Lucy: Ummm… since it’s the winter I look for anything, like, pants or anything. If I don’t have a long sleeve shirt I would just wear a sweatshirt over it

3. Easily available
   Agnes: I just, kind of like, sometimes I just pick whatever is on the top of my drawer. I just wear it… but I… I dunno. That’s just kind of what I do (laughs).

4. Comfortable and activity appropriate
   Barb: But I’m also, like athletic so I wear all that baggy loose kind of stuff. Like comfortable

There was an additional, vaguer category mentioned in all three of the first interviews, in which the girls said they just wore whatever they “feel like.” When I asked them to elaborate on what dictated their clothing mood for the day, they could not explain what this meant. One girl said she chose “nice jeans,” because that’s what her older sister wears, but struggled to articulate what “nice jeans” really were.

   Researcher: What do you consider nice jeans? A certain brand, or like…?
   Lucy: What she’s wearing right now!
   Researcher: Are they nice because they’re dark or because of how they fit or…
   Agnes: I don’t know…
   Lucy: I think they look cool… and pretty… (laughs)
   Agnes: (laughs) Ooookayyy…
As I continued talking to the girls about what they were actually wearing and how they bought their clothing, it became clearer what it might mean to wear a piece of “nice” clothing. Although I’m sure the logical considerations mentioned above came into play to some degree, they certainly were not the most important aspects of an outfit as they originally claimed. It appears that the logical considerations mentioned were what the girls viewed as appropriate answers to the questions I asked, and the “feel like” category was a vague expression of the implicit messages from the larger society. Subjects believed autonomy was overshadowed by marketing and ideas about gender that pervaded every aspect of school life (Butler, 1993; Swain, 2002; Ezzell, 2009; Giroux, 2009).

**What having them Describe Each Other Revealed**

At the end of every interview, I asked the girls to describe what the other subject was wearing to see if their descriptions would align with what they were describing. Although they were always wearing the *types* of clothes they said they like and were consistent with their group, they show that perhaps practicality was not the only thing they considered when picking out their clothes in the morning. During my first interview, this is how the girls described each other:

Agnes: Lucy is wearing Lancers Live Active tee shirt, and long sleeve but she rolled up the sleeves… She has a part going to the right (laughs)
Lucy: So my hair is down.
Agnes: Yeah, her hair is down
Lucy: Shoulder length
Agnes: Should length, okay. She has jeans on.
Lucy: Skinny jeans!
Agnes: Skinny jeans…
Lucy: We’ll they’re not really skinny but…
Agnes: Tennis shoes.
Lucy: Adidas!
Agnes: Adidas black tennis shoes… and yeah.
Lucy: Okay. I am going to describe Agnes…. she is wearing brown clogs with white socks under them. And then she’s wearing navy blue jeans with a shirt that says “stuff it” which is a basketball little creature with a net hanging from his mouth. It’s green tie-dye, basketball, yeah. And she has a bump-it in, but she’s only wearing that because we thought it would be funny to do that. So yeah, it’s shoulder length brunette… And then [the back of her shirt] says “I don’t need glory, I don’t need fame, I don’t need spotlight, I just need the ball.” Like basketball.

Although it is supposed to be Agnes’s turn to describe Lucy, Lucy is clearly unhappy with what Agnes chooses to say. Lucy thinks it is important to mention what her hair looks like, the cut of her jeans, and the brand of her tennis shoes. Even so, when it is her turn to describe Agnes, she doesn’t mention the cut of Agnes’s jeans or brands of her clothing. Perhaps she’s not even sure what brand of shoes Agnes is wearing or what type of jeans she has on… but clearly these descriptors are important to her in terms of her own clothing. She wants them to be documented on tape, because she sees them as integral indicators the self she presents—“certain items acquired a specific, localized, symbolic value, such as particular brand names, and these were ascribed a higher cultural value than others (Swain, 2002, p. 61)

All subjects corrected or included additional information about their clothing when they were being described over the course of the interviews. Most often it pertained to brand, but sometimes they wanted to be specific about the type of shoes they were wearing (Danesi, 1994). Giroux (2009) notes “branding has played an enormous role in convincing generations of young people that instead of simply buying goods, they were buying lifestyles, worldviews, ideas, and images. Goods could now be marketed as dreamscapes of desire, liberatory experiences, and modes of power” (p. 56). Wearing brand name clothes allowed subjects membership into their social group, and reinforced their desired identity of smart, athletic, and feminine. In the words of Finkelstein (1996):
“fashioning the body becomes a practice through which the individual can fashion a self” (p. 50).

Sometimes subjects would become self-conscious when being described by their friends and become apologetic about what they were wearing. This is consistent with Wooten’s analysis of how brands and labeling functions within a school setting: “the presence of observers increases targets’ motivations to seek and follow normative guidelines because it intensifies their feelings of embarrassment” (Wooten, 2006, p.192).

After Patty struggled to adequately describe the style of Barb’s sweatshirt, Barb took over the description, calling the shirt “weird” because of its unusually large cowl neck. She claimed it was not something she usually wore—it was “laundry day”—although Patty was quick to tell her she liked it. Another time, Francesca claimed that her hair was “fried” and didn’t usually look like that, and that her nails were “really messed up.”

Clearly subjects felt self-conscious under the gaze of her peers and myself, and struggled to articulate a verbal description of the savvy white middle class adolescent girl they wished to be.

**Using Clothing to Show Team Belonging**

Although girls claimed to simply wear whatever they felt like on a given day, they regularly participated in team dress up days which were used by the team to call attention to games and raise team solidarity. Team dress up days never required girls to buy new clothes, but to wear items that were reserved for family events like church or weddings, or wear clothing items in combination that were outside of the norm.

Patty: Yeah, like before any game, before home games you have to dress up nice, and then away games they pick… like sometimes you have to look like a cowgirl or whatever… and then one time for soccer we had to dress up in different colors,
just like mismatch…

Lucy: Yeah cuz usually we don’t wear [dressy clothes] unless it’s for like a sporting thing, like a… our teams, they’ll say “we’re all going to dress up tomorrow.” You know, so we’ll dress up, but usually we don’t just out of nowhere dress up in miniskirts (laughs).

Members of this sporty group did not all belong to the same groups and teams and therefore did not all participate in the same dress up days. One girl only participated in cross country (a sport that didn’t have dress up days); another was waiting to join the basketball team the following year but still participated in basketball dress up days this year to show her loyalty to the team. She viewed clothing as an important tool to include herself within the boundary of the sports team by participating in their dress up days.

It seemed like there could be a lot of different interpretations of “dress up nice,” but when I asked the girls what this meant they consistently said that they would not wear dresses or skirts (this was reserved for the female high school athlete dress up days, again, they didn’t want to present an image that was “too old” for seventh grade). Dressing nice to team members meant that they would wear black pants, flat shoes, and a “nice shirt.”

Researcher: What’s a nice shirt, like what would you—.
Patty: (laughs) One I don’t wear normally
Barb: Yeah, one I don’t wear normally.

Barb continued by saying that a “nice shirt” might have long sleeves if you normally wear short sleeves, and that it wasn’t a tee-shirt. Although the girls felt like they had complete control over what they were wearing, their choices were dominated by marketing, their peer group, gender, and the team— they made their “bodies matter” by using their clothing to label themselves and create an identity they thought was acceptable and desirable within the middle school setting.
There was even less room for interpretation on days when the team chose to have a silly dress up day:

Agnes: They, like, tell us what we should dress like, like one day was formal day so we had to wear like a dress or something really nice. And one day was like… farmer?
Lucy: We had to dress up like hicks.
Agnes: We put in, like, pigtails, and like, these lumber jack shirt thing (laughs) and bandanas… and…
Lucy: Plaid shirts.
Agnes: What did we wear for pants?
Lucy: …
Agnes: Oh! We just wore jeans, yeah.

Every component of the outfit, down to the hairstyle, was chosen by the team beforehand. Although there could be many different interpretations of this costume (they were unsure of whether it was hick, or farmer, or cowgirl), all of the girls wore the exact same thing to show their team membership. Contrary to what they had said earlier, they did not choose these outfits because they were convenient and practical or because they liked them. They frequently wore items of clothing they would not normally choose based on showing their membership to their team, making them less autonomous than they previously believed. Their sporty identity was closely linked to their consumer identity (Swain, 2002; Giroux, 2009).

Subjects viewed these dress-up days as a fun way to show membership on the team. They equated boys wearing their jerseys on game day to girls dressing-up on game day. Subjects said that when they saw a boy wearing their jersey, they would “go to their game and cheer them on and stuff,” as well as wishing them luck during school. I asked them personally why they thought they dressed-up before games:

Researcher: So why do you think a team would have you do that?
Lucy: Well, just so they know, like…
Agnes: Just do get you involved kind of, and like so...
Lucy: they’ll say “oh… that’s the team.”
Agnes: Yeah!
Lucy: They’ll say “hooh!”
Agnes: Yeah, like that’s the team, or whatever (laughs), cuz they’re all dressed-up.

Barb: School spirit…. and to get you pumped up for the game.
Patty: Yeah. We’ll be wearing like something and then we all get pumped up knowing that we’re wearing that for the game and we can talk to everybody about it.

Why couldn’t girls just wear their home or away jerseys like the boys did? Why is it gender appropriate for girls to dress in silly costumes, or to “dress nice” before a game, but not boys? For girls, dress-up events are considered an opportunity to express their natural, pretty selves (Olssen, 2002). Instead of showing a team that is strong, fast, or really skilled at their sport, the girls send a message of beauty and stereotyped femininity (Ezzell, 2009). The sillier, costumed days paint a picture of the girls as fun-loving and team oriented—also a far cry from athletic but values that relate to stereotyped views of the “nice girl” as “chase, gentle, gracious, ingenuous, good, clean, kind, virtuous, noncontroversial, and above suspicious and reproach” (Fox, 1971, p.805).

Through these two different types of dress-up, the girls create what Marilyn Frye (1983) calls a normative identification—sporty girls (part of a repressed group) align themselves and perform according to expectations as outlined by the dominant group. The team itself aids in the creation of this normative identification through mandating such dress-up days. They actively work to distance themselves from the stereotype of female athletes as lesbian enemies of the family unit: “because lesbians were assumed to be masculine creatures who rejected their female identity and roles as wives and mothers, athletic women became highly suspect” (Griffin, 2001, p. 336). Because displays of conventional femininity are so closely linked with heterosexuality, sports teams require
girls to participate in gender-based costuming to dispel these prominent ideas of the butch, or lesbian female athlete (Ezzell, 119). Through participating in such dress-up days, subjects can reassure the public (as well as themselves) that they “are normal in spite of [their] athletic interests” (Griffin, 2001, p. 340).

In the same vein, while girls who were members of the sporty group upheld that they were “better” and more athletic than other girls in their grade through defensive othering; they did not view themselves on the same level as male athletes. When talking about a coach they had the previous year, they said that they didn’t like him because he “treated them like boys.” This meant having them perform weightlifting and conditioning exercises to get them into peak physical condition for the season. They desired the atmosphere for the girls’ team to be more focused on “fun” and “team spirit,” rather than aggressive play. In this way, they need not threaten the male dominance by allowing male athletes to be the athletic stars of the school and attributing their prowess on the field partially to natural ability females do not have (Ezzell, 2009, 125). Through this, girls were able to take on a sporty, fit identity, but still be desirable to the boys in their class (Griffin, 2001, p. 340; Ezzell, 2009, 125). Because the most popular athletic boys were a romantic commodity – the sporty group needed to “protect their access” to these boys by conforming to the dominant norm (Ezzell, 2009, 124). Girls did this by continuing to maintain boundaries between themselves and the boys (dominants), and themselves and other girls (perceived inferior subordinates) by presenting as both attractive and athletic.
CHAPTER V

ANALYSIS: DRESS CODE

MS School Dress Code

Dress codes are codes of conduct designed to teach citizens to monitor themselves and mature into docile citizens “fitting for neo-liberal capitalism” (Raby, 2004, p.73). Little research has been conducted regarding “the effect that dress codes have on student’s body as a form of “everyday pedagogy” (Pomerantz, 2007, p.374). Dress codes create and define “regulatory norms” (Foucault, 1978). This norm ultimately dictates which “bodies matter” and which bodies do not within the school setting (Butler, 1993, p.4). Dress codes set up binary oppositions by which to read “the student(’s) body as good or bad, violent or safe, sexual or virginal, feminine or unfeminine, gang member or “good” citizen, appropriate or inappropriate” (Pomerantz, 2007, p.377). The messages presented by clothing students wear (or how they style their hair, what piercings they have, whether or not they have tattoos) become a script for who they are and how they will behave—there is very little room for interpretation.

I was curious about how the school dress code might limit what their students were allowed to wear. When I asked my supervising teacher for a copy of the dress code, she told me that they updated it every year in the spring, mostly in response to changing girls’ fashions. She printed a copy from the school website, which read as follows:
DRESS CODE

Each student has the right to determine personal dress within guidelines, which is, that clothing is not to distract from the educational process. Students have the responsibility to dress appropriately for school and all other school sponsored functions unless otherwise noted. Footwear must be worn except for approved activities. Unless authorized, jackets are not to be worn during the school day and backpacks are not to be in the classroom. Students have the responsibility for wearing safety or special purpose equipment whenever it is required. Staff members will have the final say for appropriateness.

Examples of inappropriate dress include:

1. Clothing advertising illegal substance for juveniles (This will include the promotion of alcoholic beverages and/or tobacco products).

2. Clothing containing obscene, discriminatory or profane language or pictures.

3. Clothing containing gang symbols or clothing worn in a manner to identify gang membership.

4. Headgear (cap, hat, bandanas, etc.) other than for religious or medical reasons in the school building. Headgear must be removed upon entering the building and stored in the student’s locker.

5. Bare or exposed midriffs or backs, low cut necklines, or exposed undergarments which distract from the educational process as determined by staff. (Guidelines are as follows: no tank tops or muscle shirts of any kind, no halter tops, no one shoulder strap tops, and skirts and shorts will be an appropriate length for school and extracurricular activities).

6. Chains and collars or bracelets with metal studs.

Figure 2. MS School Dress Code

Converting clothing into text in this way takes away all practical or visual components of dress. Clothing as text, therefore, serves only to signify and classify different groups within a school context (Foucault, 1978). As it is easy to see, there are different guidelines directed towards the different cliques and student groups in the school: Gothic and Emo Kids—read #6, Sporty and Dancer girls—pay close attention to #5. Even if a student doesn’t have a specific clique, if they wear a shirt to school depicting Stewie from the cartoon show Family Guy holding a gun (somewhat common at this specific middle
school), they will automatically receive a number of labels: bad, masculine, violent, unsafe, distracting, and inappropriate. The dress code enables this labeling process, providing a “regime of truth” or “types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true” (Foucault, 1978, p. 131). Mr. Brown’s lesson in my field experience class supported these truths as created and upheld by dress codes—girls wearing short shorts are slutty and should be avoided.

I asked subjects how the school dress code was communicated to them:

Agnes: The principal has like this long speech at the beginning of the year, and he repeats it like five times, and it’s really funny because—
Lucy: It gets really boring… when we went to orientation, we were a couple minutes late because we were just coming back from a soccer game, and we were telling her mom “drive as slow as possible and stop everywhere!” because it went on forever.
Agnes: Yeah. And he’s all like “school spirit!” and everything. And “You control the school!” (laughs)
Lucy: And then they give us a handbook, and then… they say you’re supposed to read all of it. But nobody does.
Agnes: Yeah, no one reads it.
Lucy: Well, at least I don’t. It’s a long book.

This description of the meeting with the principal provided an interesting look as to how the girls viewed the power structures functioning in the school. They indicated that they had little say in the matter—the rules were set before they arrived, and it was funny that the principal would even suggest that they had control. Even though subjects have the potential to change school policy, the long speech and longer handbook make these policies seem impossible to challenge. Girls view themselves as “already caught” within the dominant language that frames the rules and their top-down application, with little sense of themselves as potent political actors” (Raby and Domitrek, 2007, p. 931). The rules themselves were designed for, and directed at them in particular, while they favored dominant groups. Also, the fact that no one reads the handbook they receive (even
driven, academically successful students) may seem like an act of rebellion or rejection, but it is not really necessary because the dress code is already imbedded within school society and culture. The instatement of the dress code makes its rules (and punishments for breaking these rules) seem normal and reasonable (Foucault, 1978, p. 85). The letter of the dress code emphasizes appropriateness and safety at school, making its guidelines appear logical although they are arbitrary. This is what Francesca and Shakira had to say when I asked them about dress-code rule number six, directed towards the troublesome group wearing chains and things with metal studs:

Shakira: Because it’s pointy and dangerous!
Francesca: I don’t really know. It doesn’t seem like it would… hurt any or harm anyone.
Shakira: I think it’s just because of the points on them. They don’t want them to hurt anyone.
Francesca: I don’t really get it.

While Shakira believes that this rule might actually be for student protection, Francesca sees that these types of garments are not any more potentially harmful than an underwire in a bra would be. The rule is more about perpetuating norms and fashioning clean, conforming citizens than protecting the safety of other students. The dress code dictates what knowledge we have about ourselves and our fellow students—“our bodies, our relationships, our sexuality, as well as … the ways we construct knowledge and meaning in the world” (Darder, 1994, p. 7). Through dress codes, powerful groups legitimize knowledge about certain group or types of people.

Each subject knew the dress code extremely well, especially the sections that pertained to them personally. In a way, they had internalized the dress code as something they would abide by as normal, sporty girls—this was one of the lessons the school taught about how to fit into their role as women in a male dominated society (Butler,
Subjects said they never wore any items of clothing their parents disapproved of, and were rarely talked to about dress code infractions at school. Even though they had contemplated why the dress code changed for them as they got older—naming it as a rite of passage or necessary change in expectations as they went through puberty—they didn’t like the way their clothing options were restricted:

Researcher: What is the dress code like?
Francesca: When we were younger it was better.
Shakira: Yeah, but like our age we’re mostly trying to keep away the sexual parts. Like our bra straps, they don’t want us to have our bra straps showing.
Francesca: But like the shirts have to be past your shoulders, and sometimes if they’re like right here (gestures to the edge of her shoulder) you have to put on a sweatshirt or something.
Shakira: And then I’m not so sure about the pants… they have to be either your hand length down, or it has to be three inches above the knee.
Francesca: And that’s like really long… it’s really hard to find them. Last year there were a couple girls (…) who were wearing really short shorts and then the teachers, like after a couple weeks of doing it the teachers got on to us and said that we couldn’t wear those.
Shakira: So you have to wear, like, leggings underneath it.

By policing the clothing of older girls more than younger girls, school dress code enforces the ideas that mature, womanly bodies are something to be ashamed of (rules about straps and the length of shorts are designed “keep away the sexual parts” as Shakira says)—bodies of smaller, thinner girls (more dominantly considered beautiful and feminine) and boys bodies are not as closely regulated (Pomerantz, 2007, p. 375). Even though subjects stated that teachers rarely talked to students about dress code infraction, generally they tried to follow the school dress code consistently to avoid getting negative attention and to conform to the norm. When I asked Agnes if she thought the dress code was fair she said:
Agnes: It’s like a good rule because some people might like abuse the power that we might get if we didn’t have a dress code, but sometimes it’d be nice if you could wear like a tank top in the summer if it was like a really hot day…

Although she claimed short shorts were “weird” (not sexual or distracting), she also identified power as something a girl could gain from wearing clothes outside of dress code. In presenting a poststructuralist feminist point of view regarding a girl expelled from school for showing too much cleavage, Pomerantz (2007) notes that some students—especially those that are larger or curvier especially—make “maintaining a suitable school atmosphere [as defined by teachers and administrators] impossible” because they are outside the dominant modes of beautiful and acceptable (p. 377). The dress code keeps the dominant sex dominant by giving reason to remove students outside of these guidelines from school premises until they are dressed “appropriately.”

In the same breath that Agnes says the dress code is fair, she retracts her statement, saying also that she would like to be able to wear a tank top when it’s hot out. Shakira and Francesca provide similar responses, saying they believe the dress code is fair, and then saying that they’d like to make changes to it:

Shakira: It’s fair.
Francesca: I guess I… well, it’s fair but I wish that we could get away with some thicker straps… Like I know that I bought a lot of tank tops that have straps like three inches thick on them because we used to be able to wear those and then they said we couldn’t wear them.
Shakira: And I wish we could get away with short shorts.
Francesca: Yeah, even ones that are like five inches above the knee. I think [regulations are more for girls] because the straps are more towards us, short shorts are more towards us…

All groups also noted that there were many sections of the dress code specifically focused on females. When I asked Barb and Patty who the dress code was geared toward, they were quick to answer:
Barb: Girls.
Patty: I think more girls, yeah.
Barb: Cuz girls care what they look like… so they try to like… they think one thing is cool so they do it, but then it’s like—
Patty: It’s inappropriate and stuff. Talking about like, short shorts… I don’t think guys would be wearing short shorts (laughs).
Barb: (laughs) Yeah… guys wouldn’t want to wear short shorts.
Patty: Or the no spaghetti straps.
Barb: And then, like low-cut necklines it says… but boys don’t really— (laughs)

Most groups laughed about the idea of boys wearing these stereotypically female clothes, but when I asked why more boys didn’t feel like it was necessary to dress in a sexual manner, they avoided the question (“this is really weird!”). Clearly they had not considered how the construct of gender in a school setting dictated what they wore on a day-to-day basis, or why females might be more sexualized than males. They viewed the differences in boys and girls fashion as a natural part of their sex/gender, not a structure created by society.

Dress codes are crucial to adolescent identity formation because they have the power to change how students think about their own and other student’s bodies. They also perpetuate three the conservative discourses regarding gender and sexuality for females outlined by Fine (1998) as part of most sexual education curriculums:

1. Sexuality as Violence: If a girl does not abide by the dress code by covering parts of their body deemed sexual, she should expect sexual harassment such as bra strap snapping and catcalls (Pomerantz, 2007). The dress code is necessary to keep girls from experiencing this kind of sexual abuse.

2. Sexuality as Victimization: If a girl does not abide by the dress code by covering parts of her body deemed sexual, she is naïve and does not understand that she is putting herself in a bad situation (Pomerantz, 2002). A
girl who understands this risk yet persists in purposefully dressing in a sexual manner will become pregnant, diseased, or drop out of school (Fine, 1998). She is “troublesome” and will not succeed traditionally in larger society (Foucault, 1978; Giroux, 2009). The dress code is necessary to guide girls along the former, path to a normal life as defined by the state.

3. Sexuality as Morality: If a girl does not abide by the dress code by covering parts of their body deemed sexual, she is not fulfilling her duty in the school as a moral guards and helper along the male route to intellectual superiority. She should present the image “nice girl,” and be an example of control, willpower, and chastity (Fox, 1971). Men are unable to control themselves, thus it is the females job to maintain covered exterior that will not detract from the male’s ability to learn (Fine, 1998; Pomerantz, 2007). The dress code is necessary to ensure that females will not take away from male education.

However, there are many problems with these lines of logic. The dress code assumes that girls are not distracted by boy’s bodies (or that girls education is not as important as boys)—dress code for boys is not about policing them sexually, but about maintaining masculine norms by regulating subcultures (Pomerantz, 2007). This strongly sends the message that women are to be valued (or devalued) based on their looks and self presentation (Butler, 1993). Furthermore, the dress code suggests that aggressive sexual acts or sexual distraction on the part of the male is the fault of the female victim. It also takes any sexual agency away from females because she cannot dress sexually and remain within normal social bounds—she is labeled either silly and unsophisticated, or
“bad” and a future outcast of society. Mr. Brown’s teaching regarding middle and high school aged girls supported all of these same fallacies.

**Health Class Reinforces ideas about Female Sexuality in the Dress Code**

These three discourses not only exist within the dress code, but are specifically taught in the curriculums of 5th and 7th grade sexual education. Not all of the subjects I interviewed had been in 7th grade health yet, but they had experienced a short 5th grade health curriculum. When I asked what the sex portion of their health curriculum was like (I kept calling it “sex ed,” and they kept correcting me—the class was HEALTH!) I got a variety of answers. Because they had all had to take diagram labeling tests, some mentioned the actual mechanics and parts involved in having sex for reproductive purposes:

Lucy: Like… the eggs… how you make babies.
Barb: The process and stuff.
Lucy: Sexual reproduction.

Others immediately thought of the scary or gross parts of the curriculum:

Barb: It was weird! We had to watch a video of this girl… having a baby… er, yeah… giving birth. It was really gross.
Shakira: It was a nasty video… we had to watch one of a lady giving birth and then the baby started coming out, I’m like “What is that?!?” and then like I started crying and you could see the head and I’m like “Oh! A baby… so pretty….”

Agnes: We talked about like diseases and stuff…

These three comments show that the girls have already been taught about sexuality as violence and sexuality as victimization (Fine, 1998). Babies are presented as the almost unavoidable consequence of having sex. Sex is for procreation, and therefore not something that teenagers should be considering in the first place. Giving birth (the bloody, nasty, and terrifying act shown in the health video) is presented as the outcome of
teen sex. Because males are not physically burdened with pregnancy, the birthing process, or, in some cases, even the baby, females are seen as the victims of sexual activity (Fine, 1998). If an adolescent female is lucky enough not to get pregnant, she could contract a gross incurable disease that would ruin her life socially, physical, and sexually (Fine, 1998). In the one health class that I observed, students presented the findings of a research project they did on a specific STD to the class, complete with graphic pictures and details about the worst possible outcomes. Spending a week educating about disease was used as a scare tactic to prevent teens from engaging in sexual activity.

When I asked the girls if the sex curriculum felt relevant to their current dating lives, they said that there was a short section about sex and relationships. It mostly focused on them not getting to serious at this age:

Shakira: To keep safe relationships and not get too over board. Well basically just like safe relationships… like not – yeah…
Patty: Just not having sex at all.
Shakira: Like safe relationships like you want to stay minimal and like, you don’t like start making out. You can kiss every now and then but not make-out, yeah, and like go into your bed and that stuff (laughs).

Francesca: They just try to talk about like… I don’t know. Just to be careful, I guess… I don’t know I can’t remember really… yeah just like they just tell you that like just say no if, I don’t know to refuse or whatever.

These two sections of interview show sexuality as violence and sexuality as victimization, as well as sexuality as individual morality (Fine, 1998). Females can allow boys to kiss them (“allow” not “desire”), but they should not “like go into your bed and that stuff” even though this is something boys will want to do. Females have to safeguard themselves against sexual activity and male predators so they do not get
pregnant before they are married. None of the girls mentioned female sexuality, desire, or contraception methods.

At this age, it seemed like it might be more important to discuss the emotional side of relationships because they are just beginning to interact with members of the opposite sex in a sexual way. When I asked if they had talked about what dating is like in 7th grade—what activities might be fun, what kinds of emotions you can expect to feel, what a healthy relationship looks like—this had not been covered at all beyond the sexual element:

Barb: I don’t know. We didn’t talk about dating or whatever or going out…
Lucy: Just bodies and like… body stuff.
Barb: I think they should
Lucy: I’m guessing they like, teach us more about it in high school… when there’s like more dating and stuff like that.

Although Lucy claimed there was not a lot of dating in middle school, she had been “going out” with someone in her grade for longer than anyone else in the class—four months. Subjects wanted more, real information about sexual behavior and relationships that pertained to their current lives.

Discourses subjects internalize from health class—sexuality as victimization, violence, and morality—are closely reinforced by the messages about female sexuality sent by the school dress code. The popular culture subjects consumed regularly also reinforced these concepts, making it a pervasive and surrounding discourse.

**Popular Culture Reinforces Ideas in the Dress Code about Female Identity**

**Consumerism**

In his book *Youth in a Suspect Society*, Henry A. Giroux (2009) notes that “global corporations and the punishing state are now the dominant storytellers and influence in
children’s lives, shaping their futures according to the interests of the market” (p. 28-29). As discussed in the previous section about the good groups versus troublesome groups in school, subjects interviewed were members of the consumer society, aligning themselves with the ideas corporations present about normal adolescence and thereby avoiding punishment. Embracing consumer culture as a way to avoid being devalued or outcast “is a dramatic shift in how American society views, talks about, represents, and engages young people” (Giroux, 2009, p. 28). It sends a strong message to youth that they need to strive to succeed academically and eventually in a high paying career—not having the means to purchase necessary goods to perpetuate these carefully built identities could eventually place subjects in the troublesome group themselves.

A Newsweek article *The Truth About Tweens*, states that kids feel more pressure to fit in and be successful at a younger age (Wingert and Kantrowitz, 1999). Marketers have chosen to target these goal-driven “preternaturally frantic kids because it's an opportunity to lock in highly impressionable consumers” (Wingert and Kantrowitz, 1999). Furthermore, because young adolescents are too old for child-care but too young to be really enmeshed in social spaces outside of school and school activities, they have more time to ingest popular media. As pop culture grows more and more ubiquitous by spanning multiple forms of technology (most TV shows have websites, books and magazines can be read online, music is downloaded off the internet), students aged 8-18 spend an average of seven and a half hours with their electronic devices each day (Lewin, 2010). The advertising opportunities are endless. Marketers target adolescents in particular because they realize adolescents not only spend their own money, but “exert a powerful influence on parental spending” (Giroux, 2009, p. 43).
In this section, I will specifically examine popular culture consumed by subjects and discussed during the interviewing process: magazines found in the school library, Justin Bieber and Taylor Swift, and the TV shows *Pretty Little Liars* and *Teen Mom*. These pieces of culture are “directed at women from the scrap heap of mass culture” and provide pervasive discourses of femininity for adolescents (Driscoll, 2002, 186). Girls learn “how to mediate and define themselves within this parade of sales pitches, ads, and commodified spectacles” (Giroux, 2009, p.49). These “cultural forms and interpellations (or dominant social processes) call women into being” by telling them how “good” and “normal” and “right” looks and acts (Bulter, 1993; McRobbie, 2004).

Do pieces of popular culture reflect and influence the same concepts of normative femininity and normative masculinity seen in the clothing chosen by subjects? How do pop culture manipulates take away from subjects autonomy while convincing them that they are presenting an autonomous, unified self? And lastly, are the pop culture messages they receive reiterations of the normalizing discourse they are taught at school?

**Magazine Messages**

**Women are Valuable for their Looks: Who Wore it Better?**

According to Driscoll (2002), ‘‘girls’’ magazines invoke a simultaneous and equated development of gender identity and sexual identity and produce a normative image of the girl to who they are address that… maintains some dominant conventions’’ (p. 156-157). Although there is increased focus on autonomy and self-expression, the ad filled pages of most teen magazines perpetuate the ideas about consumer culture and what it takes to be normal: “On one hand, girls are encouraged to “be yourself”; on the
other, they are bombarded with seductive images of which clothes are cool, what music is popular, what places are “in” (Norton, 2002, p. 299).

Many of the girls in this study said they read *People*—specifically fashion related sections:

Shakira: People. I like find out like the new gossip news or I like doing those cool “Who Wore It Better.”
Lucy: Oh, yeah. I like judging it, yeah.

This section of the magazine allows readers to decide which of two celebrities looked better in a high end piece of merchandise. The reader can view both pictures and decide which accessories and shoes go the best with a specific dress or pair of pants, but the ultimate decision comes down to popular vote—percentages of reader preference are listed at the bottom of the pictures. Through this exercise, almost like a quiz, they can test how well they are in tuned with norms of beauty set by society. Furthermore, it sends the message “that true power comes from getting men to lust after you and other women to envy you” (Douglas, 2009, p. 294). Magazines asked subjects to judge the women based on their appearance, not consider their aspirations or career choices.

Francesca also said that she liked seeing how people put together fashion pieces or achieved certain makeup looks:

Francesca: Yeah I – if there’s like magazines at our house I read like People or like Teen Vogue… it’s about clothes and makeup and stuff like that. … I kind of like watching people put makeup on or like, I don’t know, learning how to do it.

Although she also said that she wouldn’t wear a look she learned from a magazine at school, through learning these techniques she is practicing for becoming a heterosexual woman—her ultimate goal (Driscoll, 2002, p. 157). She has internalized the messages sent by the magazine, preparing herself to “wear it better” in the future.
The middle school where I conducted this study carried both Cosmo Girl and Seventeen Magazine. Although the girls did not mention these particular magazines during the interview, I observed them paging through them in the library. Looking at print copies of the magazines and their websites, I found makeup tips, hairstyle options, and information on fashion trends. Girls are supposed to look fresh and wholesome, but sexy at the same time. There was also a slew of articles written to provide girls information about what boys like: “Master the Make-Out: Five Tips that will Drive Him Crazy,” “Hookup Tips” (including “tease him” and “tease, tease, tease”), and “The Bitchy Girl Moves Guys Hate” (Hearst Communications, 2011b, d). The article “How to Get Your Crush in 30 Days” gave girls day by day advice to attract a boyfriend, starting with styling your hair correctly, moving on to tips on how to talk to him, then effective ways to flirt, and on day 30 evaluating if “he’s worthy of your love” (Hearst, Communications, 2011a). Why not evaluate his worthiness before spending a month of your life pursuing and thinking about him every waking moment?

There are many issues that adolescent girls face that are not present in these magazines at all. According to the glossy pages a girl’s main objective should be striving to achieve the perfect body—which typically portrayed as white, tall, toned, tan, and thin—instead of succeeding academically, becoming independent, or thinking critically (Driscoll, 157). While searching for magazines she found appropriate for her adolescent daughter, Norton (2002) asks the editor of an innovative magazine for teenaged girls what they address that more mainstream publications do not. The list was extensive:

- Feminism, nontraditional careers, tracking in schools, identity, and assertiveness in romantic relationships. We also address sexual abuse, communication with family members, nutrition, media literacy, anger management, aggression against women,
objectification, and legal issues that teens have to face. Virtually every feature we do is completely different from commercial mags” (Norton, 2002, p. 296).

According to the dominant discourse, the confident, beautiful, and cohesive selves put forward by the girls on pages of mainstream magazines do not need to consider any of these deeper problems because they have already achieved all female teens need to accomplish.

**Violence, Victimization, and Morality: Sexual Responsibility Quiz**

On the *Seventeen* website, I noticed that the April 2011 issue of the magazine ran an article interviewing three girls from the television show *Teen Mom* (Hearst Communications, 2011d). There was a video of the girls talking about the difficulties of having a child as a teenager. Looking through the list of back articles, I noticed that there were quite a few devoted to preventing teen pregnancy. One of the activities was to take an animated quiz geared towards male and female teens. Overall, the quiz tried to be realistic, provided valuable information about teen relationships, and sent a realistic message overall (even if it was also a scare tactic): “The only way to prevent pregnancy 100% of the time is not to have sex, but if you do you know that you have to use protection every single time” (The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2011). However, the scenarios the test taker was supposed to consider consistently placed men in a position of power. The test taker was supposed to envision themselves as a male at a party where an intoxicated female puts herself in vulnerable position, a female in a long term relationship dating a male who refuses to wear a condom, and a female who is having casual sex with a male while hoping the relationship will turn into something more (The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2011). Female desire is completely absent from the picture: females are
presented as victims of male predatory sexual behavior who are supposed to choose the right, moral thing (abstinence) or risk pregnancy or disease (Fine, 1998). Although I am not sure if the subjects in this study ever took or saw this quiz, the magazines that they read at their school library endorsed the negative messages it communicated regarding female sexual agency and responsibility.

**Popular Music Icons and Idols**

**Women are Valuable for their Looks: Taylor Swift**

All subjects mentioned Taylor Swift as a celebrity they liked and listened to on the radio. She is widely viewed as a role model for adolescents because she writes her own songs and takes creative control of her music. She also presents an image that is very wholesome and girl-next-door. Subjects noted that she seemed vulnerable, saying that a most of Swifts songs “are about boyfriends and them cheating on her and stuff. USA Today’s Nashville correspondent Brian Mansfield is quoted as saying, “I think girls don’t see her so much as bigger than life than as more like their perfect selves” (Sclafani, 2010). Subjects noted that she was much more relatable than Ke$ha or Lady Gaga, who get “ messed up” and wear “weird clothing.”

In an interview with *The Wall Street Journal*, Swift talks about being as a role model:

> When I was 8 years old, it mattered what my favorite singer said and wore and expressed opinions about. And if I have a chance to matter to the growth and hopes and wishes of little girls, that's something I can't take lightly. So I do factor them in when I'm thinking about what to wear, and what to say, and whether or not to go out to bars even though I'm not 21. (Farley, 2010, par.12)

Perhaps Swift manages not to endorse under-age drinking, but she does present traditional images of femininity that perpetuate dominant norms. Swift is a spokesperson
and model for *Cover Girl Cosmetics*, selling their “easy, breezy, beautiful” line in magazines, on television, and on the *Walmart* website. The script for the *NatureLuxe* line of makeup urges girls to take up their body projects like a political cause: “Get samples, rewards… get involved! Join the beauty movement to help all of us rock the Covergirls we are” (CoverGirl Cosmetics, producer, 2011, 0:16-0:23). She emphasizes the idea that using makeup to enhance features the dominant society considers beautiful is somehow liberating, and not simply a money-making ploy.

While using her cookie cutter beauty to endorse makeup products, sell her own line of sundresses, and performing cameo roles in movies, Swift attempts to present a nerdy image through many of her song lyrics. She claims that she was unpopular in high school because she was studious and liked to listen to country music (Farley, 2010). In spite of this, in the music video *You Belong with Me* she juxtaposes being unfashionable, wearing glasses, lacking self-confidence to romance (Big Machine Records, producer, 2009, 0:16-1:18). The smart uncool girl utilizes her “subversive niceness” to make herself more likeable and “normal” (read: doormat), yet she cannot compete with her crush’s girlfriend and steal him away until she takes off her glasses, puts on a white, feminine dress and meets him at the dance (Big Machine Records, producer, 2009, 3:00; Lemish, 2010). This dramatic physical transformation is what causes her crush to realize that he “belongs” with her, as the song title indicates—her body matters, serving as an indicator that she is finally datable now that she is beautiful (Big Machine Records, 2009, 3:07; Butler, 1993). She was an “easy, breezy” girl all along—she needed to buy the right products and clothes to let this “natural,” ultra-feminine side show.
Subjects viewing Swift as a role model will hear the message loud and clear: it is important to have the right things and present the right image. Smart women are only valuable if they can be both smart and beautiful.

**Violence, Victimization, and Morality: Justin Bieber**

Pop star Justin Bieber came up in each interviewing section when we discussed music, although no one talked about his songs or him as an artist. The girls were completely focused on his outward appearance:

Shakira: Justin Bieber is hot… he’s--wait, he is 16 and he…
Lucy: He wears skinny jeans with these cool awesome shoes, like sneakers. Yeah…. And then he goes, “woo,” like he flips his hair… definitely flips his Bieber hair.
Shakira: Yeah, Bieber fever! And Justin Bieber can get any lady. He’s pretty hot.

Although both girls thought he was “hot” and were excited to talk about him, Lucy was also in tuned to the consumerism aspect of being a pop star. When I asked what kind of girl Bieber would date, she said

Lucy: Well, one who doesn’t wear Uggs… or this magazine that said he’d never go for a lady with Uggs. (To Shakira) Is that why you don’t own a pair of Uggs?

With this comment, she acknowledges that what pop stars do, say, and wear influence teen purchasing choices. She was not a Bieber fan, but she knew that Shakira’s allegiance would prevent her from buying Uggs. Girls strive to make themselves into a specific Bieber (white middle-class) feminine ideal—down to not wearing a certain type of shoes that other advertisements tout as trendy and cool. With additional insight Lucy also added

Lucy: Yeah. Well, like in magazine, they’ll say, “Oh, I’d totally date a fan.” But that’s really like I guess marketing so people will go to his concert, so maybe they could “fall in love” or whatever.
Because Bieber’s main appeal is his physical appearance—not his music—he has to make himself appear available so he can sell more tickets to his concert. What exactly is the image Bieber is selling beyond skinny jeans and a feathered haircut? Though too young to appear (or sound) very masculine, Bieber strongly enforces stereotypical roles and male and female sexuality.

In his song *One Less Lonely Girl*, Bieber presents himself as a protector of women while other men are scary predators. The song tells the story of a girl in an emotionally abusive relationship (if not physically as well); the lyrics reference a cycle of packed bags, torn photographs, tears, and miserable holidays (The Island Def Jam Music Group, producer, 2009, 1:24-1:36). Although she’s unhappy, she keeps going back to her boyfriend who is not treating her how women “deserve to be treated” according to Bieber. With the guidance of Bieber (another male) however, perhaps she will be able finally pull herself back together:

I can fix up your broken heart  
I can give you a brand new start  
I can make you believe, yeah  
I just wanna set one girl free to fall, free to fall  
She's free to fall, fall in love with me  

I'm coming for you, I'm gonna put you first  
I'm coming for you, I'll show you what you're worth  
That's what I'm gonna do, if you let me inside your world  
There's gonna be one less lonely girl (The Island Def Jam Music Group, producer, 2009, 2:30-2:49, 0:59-1:20)

The girl is portrayed as having no agency in the song. It’s as though she *must* have a boyfriend to shape her identity. Perhaps the song is right in that Bieber explicates that men show women what they’re worth by perpetuating these stereotypes of
heteronormativity (Butler, 2006; Ezzell, 2009). Why pluck the girl from the arms of a violent dominant and place her in the arms of a colonizing one?

This interpretation of the song is not as far-fetched as it might seem. Bieber and his mother (who is with him on the road all the time) are born again Christians, interested in proselytizing to anyone who will listen. During a Vanity Fair interview, his mother told interviews that “after a personal encounter with God, she believes that she and Justin have been put on earth to bring light and inspiration to the world.” (Vanity Fair, 2011, par. 9) Christianity is closely tied with the post-feminist movement and ideas about female sexuality—while Bieber does not insist on abstinence until marriage, he is openly anti-choice.

In an interview with Rolling Stone, he says, "I think you should just wait for the person you're...in love with." (Grigoriadis, 2011, par. 3). He is careful to maintain his own virginal status, saying that he has loved people but never actually been in love. Even so, he does not support a woman’s right to choose: "I really don't believe in abortion…it's like killing a baby" (Grigoriadis, 2011, par. 6). In the case of rape, Bieber does not take a firm anti-abortion stance, but seems to believe in divine providence: "Well, I think that's really sad, but everything happens for a reason” (Grigoriadis, 2011, par. 6).

Although young and inexperienced, this chart-topping pop star manages to maintain his popularity by making statements maintaining conservative norms and ideals.

Bieber is not reaching his goal, “to basically make people happy, to inspire them, and to have everyone root for me,” through pushing a conservative post-feminist agenda on young consumers (Vanity Fair, 2011, par. 2). Because subjects viewed Bieber as the ideal boyfriend candidate, they shaped their identity around who they believed his perfect
girlfriend would be. They adjusted their clothing choice to match his express likes and dislikes (like Uggs), and the concepts of themselves to match his values about the role of women he declares through his music and in interviews.

Television

Women are Valuable for their Looks: Pretty Little Liars

When talking to subjects about their favorite TV shows, they were most excited to discuss ABC Family’s Pretty Little Liars. Pretty Little Liars began after Alloy Entertainment (a jack-of-all-trades entertainment company that produces TV shows, books, and films) began developing a teen version of Desperate Housewives. CEO Leslie Morganstein described it as “a murder mystery with a soap” (Springen, 2010, par. 4). After outlining main plot points and characters, they handed the project to author Sara Shepard to write into an adolescent chapter book series. The first Pretty Little Liars book was published in 2006. After the written series gained popularity, the TV show came out in 2010 (Springen, 2010).

The show teaches adolescents that acquiring things is the way to true happiness: “principles of communal responsibility are derided in favor of individual happiness, largely measured through the acquisition and disposability of consumer good” (Giroux, 2009, p. 2). The main characters in the show are described as “‘frenemies’ who have it all: the exclusive prep school educations, the Mercedes-Benzes, and the designer wardrobes,” as if exclusivity and status symbols are the natural preoccupations of adolescent girls (The Young Adult Choice Awards, 2009, p. c4). The lead female characters devote a lot of their time to shopping, discussing clothing, and watching their weight so they can present a uniform and flawless image of femininity to the men they
pursue (Pomerantz, 2007; Lemish, 2010). The girls even have signature lipstick shades—they know each other’s color by name.

Although the show delves into many heavier topics that teens encounter including drug and alcohol use, academic pressure, eating disorders, shop lifting, sex, rape, and sexual preference, it still has managed to maintain a PG rating and remain on a self-proclaimed “family network.” CEO of Alloy Entertainment says “Some of our characters have sex, but you don’t see it… You assume at some points they’re drinking alcohol, but you don’t see beer bottles” (Springen, 2010, par. 7). Although the CEO making decisions for what should be shown on prime time television claims to be keeping girls’ best interests in mind, it is ridiculous to claim that she has omitted alcohol and sex by excluding them visually from the show (Lemish, 2010). It is not necessary to graphically describe every detail in order for viewers to get the general idea—the show still weighs in on all of these different topics, recreating societal norms.

Author Shepard goes so far as to label the events she wrote in the books that drive the TV series as cautionary tales: “Any of the scenes where the girls are drinking, nothing good ever happens. I try to make them change and learn to be better people and not be so obsessed with how they look or how they’re acting” (Springen, 2010, par.8). Even if this was her original intention, the portrayal of the girls in the TV show perpetuates female teen preoccupation with outward appearance—the four main characters have long flowing hair, wear expensive and stylish clothes, and are never seen without makeup. Even if a specific character is not portrayed as being particularly vapid, the fact that she is dressed to the nines in every scene speaks to the fact that this appearance of extreme consumer-femininity is (or should be) natural expression of a true gender (Wolf, 1991;
Butler, 2006). It is most beautiful to be naturally beautiful—although clearly the lacquered façade presented by these characters is far from effortless, they put on a good air of nonchalance with the help of costume, hair, and makeup artists. Through conversations, their characters advertise perfume, hair products and lip gloss as well as the obviously outward features (clothing). In order emulate the characters they admire (four of six subjects said they wanted to be like pretty little liar Aria), subjects worry about having the money to buy what they need to create this image and achieving bodily perfection.

**Violence, Victimization, and Morality: Teen Mom**

Not all subjects followed *Teen Mom* as closely as they followed *Pretty Little Liars*, though they had all seen at least one episode and had a general understanding of what the show was about. Although *Teen Mom* touts itself as a realistic look at what it’s like to be a teenage mother, the show began as a political tool to try to help lower the teen pregnancy rate in the United States. Whether the young mothers depicted are struggling through an abusive relationship, fighting to pay for formula, longing for support from their own family, or feeling guilty for giving their baby up for adoption, the show details the most dramatic and emotional parts of the girl’s lives while sending the message that they deserve the hardship because they should have known better than to give in to male sexual coercion (Fine, 1998).

In her article *The Myth of the Teenage Pregnancy Epidemic*, Kierra Johnson (2010) points out that teen having sex is not the real issue:

Teenage pregnancy isn’t the epidemic. The lack of information and support for people to make healthy decisions about their lives is the true epidemic. The culture of shame and scapegoating around sex is the real problem. And this epidemic crosses generations, with young people feeling the brunt of it” (par. 8).
The show focuses very little on the choices these teen moms made to become pregnant. Perhaps that’s obvious—clearly she had sex. But sex does not automatically mean pregnancy. The message is a scare tactic to prevent adolescents from having sex that focuses on how life changes for the worse once someone has a baby instead of teaching teens valuable information about how to prevent pregnancy if they do decide to have sex. The show aligns itself closely with conservative Kersten (1991) who says that young women are “least able to perceive and protect their own interests when "liberated" to sleep with men who seek only to exploit them” (par.77) Perhaps a more rigorous, realistic sex education curriculum would help girls perceive and protect themselves adequately instead of taking away choice.

Subjects viewed the show as a valuable and didactic cultural critique:

Lucy: Yeah… watching it makes you kind of like think about it.
Shakira: Like--yeah, and make sure you don’t have it until marriage.

They read its abstinence message loud and clear. Because the fathers on the show were often unreliable, the show also reinforced the discourse of victimization they learned in health class and the school dress code:

Shakira: Uh-uh [no]… Because they always ditch the girls right away. They make the girl to grow up with the baby and pay for all the stuff.
Researcher: Do you think it’s a fair image of them?
Shakira: Usually for them it is.
Lucy: Well, high school boys, if they got somebody pregnant, they most likely will just ditch them.

It also reinforced ideas about the discourse of morality because subjects blamed the girls on the show (not the fathers) for the unplanned pregnancy:

Shakira: It’s kind of interesting to see how they screwed up their lives… they’re already in season two of Teen Mom and every single time at least one of them
actually breaks up with their boyfriend and wants to get back together but they can’t, and stuff like that.

Entwined with MTV’s narrative about what’s “cool,” what to buy, what images are important, the show sends a strong message that in order to be a “normal” teenager and live a “normal” life, adolescents must have the right stuff—although babies may be cute, they are definitely not hip accessories to a young life style. Ironically, if a teenaged girl does become pregnant, they can use it as their ticket to achieve stardom— magazines like Life & Style, People, InTouch, OK!, and Us Weekly have featured the girls in the show on the covers of their magazines. Teen moms can use their profits from the show to support their child and buy the necessary items to regain normalcy... provided they lose the baby weight. Teen Mom enforces male and female gender stereotypes, silences female desire, and manages to support a conservative agenda surrounding sex education in the guise of reality TV.
CHAPTER VI
CONCLUSION

The ideas presented in this study are not intended to provide insight into the world of the mythical universal adolescent, but to examine a specific, unique case (Finders, 2007). Even so, the findings still have implications for further study and educational applications regarding the role of sport in schools, health class curriculum, and critical media literacy.

A key part of subject’s identity formation was their relationship to school sports. They used this identity to “defensively other” girls in “good” social groups, placing themselves staunchly inside “good” lines and declaring themselves most “normal.” Subjects unwittingly continued and reproduced stereotypes of the “ditz girl” and the “nerdy girl” through this defensive othering. The sporty group used clothing to create boundaries around their own group and to protect themselves from the “troublesome” group, centering their identity on critical difference from these classmates.

At the same time, team dress up days that centered on expression natural femininity and images of “nice” girls, served to the sporty group safely within the heterosexual limits of female athletes, and away from the prominent lesbian athlete stereotype. Subjects wanted team practices to be more about team bonding and having fun than increasing physical fitness and athletic skills so they were not seen as a boyish, overly competitive team. Subjects strove to protect a critical resource, the athletic males they deemed desirable, by not challenging the idea that boys were superior athletes.
Schools, coaches, and athletes should actively consider how sport might “reflect and reinforce other social problems” (Ezzell, 2009, p. 128). If subjects went so far as to identify themselves by their involvement with sports, it is important to scrutinize the structures and stereotypes at play within this system. Specifically examining dress up days for female athletes (instead of wearing jerseys to indicate that there is a game) could lead to a valuable discussion about the goals and roles of female athletics within a school setting. Showing students photographs and portrayals of female athletes in the media such as Maria Sharapova—often shown in bikinis or sexualized while playing the sport though she is extremely strong and agile—could also be used to provoke critical thinking and discussion of gender within athletics. Another facet of this would be striving to eliminate “sex and race disparities in coaching and sports administrative positions” within the school, thereby providing older female role models for athletes and a female voice for policy discussion (Ezzell, 2009).

Although subjects found the sexual information they received in health class “interesting” and “important,” it was not age appropriate because it did not also discuss teen relationships. This kind of sexually focused yet relationship deficient teaching is reflected in the bodies of research—many studies have been conducted about adolescent sexual behavior, but very few exist regarding adolescent relationships (Furman, 2002, p.177). The teaching of romantic development in the school setting “should incorporate social romantic and sexual events, rather than sexual events alone” (O’Sullivan et al, 2007, p.101). From the discussion of “going out” in the 7th grade class, it became clear that very few (if any) girls in their group were even considering having sex. Therefore, in order for the health/sex education curriculum to be meaningful, it needs to teach about
romantic relationships which are relevant to the student (Emes and Cleveland-Innes, 2003; Kymes, 2011). Because romantic relationships vary depending on student age, race, gender, and social class, further research needs to be completed before significant curriculum change can take place.

The information girls received about sexuality from the health class curriculum, the dress code, and pop culture influences present sexuality and victimization, violence or morality. There is very little discussion of the discourse of desire, creating a view that a “nice” and “normal” female is a subject who does not have her own sexuality unless she is refusing a male aggressor. This is problematic because subjects in this study believed themselves to be autonomous actors though enmeshed in a complex system of consumer culture—they viewed their choices about clothing, friendships, and relationships to be examples of their true self. Because of the veiled nature of these messages, they thought that their position within school and society was the natural position for a seventh grade girl. They did not challenge oppressive structures—places where the social text fell apart or didn’t really make sense— that called for further thought.

This is not to suggest that subjects are silly or incapable of understanding the underlying structures and lines of flight present in their everyday lives (Masny, 2005-2006). In the words of Finders (2007), “learning is enmeshed in social webs; a student-centered curriculum must consider the tangles that constrict students’ choices and decisions” (Finders, 2007, p.125). Students should be taught critical media literacy. In the words of Pailliotet et al (2000), critical media literacy is the “active, critical construction of meaning, whether the text happens to be a book, film, television program, TV commercial, Web site, or music video” (p. 208). Students need to know that the
people that write these types of media ultimately are trying to sell a product, an idea, an image to a specific target audience—thousands of hours have been devoted to market-research (Pailliotet et al, 2000; Giroux, 2009). There is always someone (or some systemic force) behind the screen with an outside agenda. Teaching students how to think critically about daily influences allows them to better understand democracy and themselves as pluralistic. They will begin to embrace that they are not a “unified identity, a single coherent “self” […] and[…] recognize themselves as continually changing, multiple and sometimes conflicted” (Norton, 2002, p. 299). Through seeing themselves as complicated texts and critically considering the world around them, students become open to the possibility of making necessary revisions to their lives as written by dominant culture. They begin to see opportunities to open new spaces for discussion and self by contesting patriarchal structures and practicing critical media literacy in their everyday lives.

There are many implications for the English classroom in terms of multiple subjectivities and critical media literacy. Students should be encouraged to consider the role of learning and multiple subjectivities—why is it important to learn new information? Is learning simply recalling pieces of unchanging knowledge, or does it change how we view ourselves and the world around us? Asking students to journal after reading a piece of literature, and then after a classroom discussion about the same piece of literature could help them see how their views changed through the discussion— their original perception was not static and natural, but subject to change. Anticipation guides are another way for students to discover their constantly changing and sometimes conflicting identities; asking them to respond to the same statements before and after
reading lets them gauge how their perceptions have changed. Teachers should be aware of and acknowledge multiple subjectivities within themselves and their students—race, class, and gender are real, relevant contributors to everyday classroom experiences.

Critical media literacy can also be integrated into the English classroom. Asking students to read a text in conjunction with a graphic novel raises important questions—what choices did the artist make in terms of paneling, form, and text? What is added or lost through this interpretation? The same kind of analysis can take place through watching the movie version of a text—what is gained or omitted? Why might a director choose a particular camera angle? These critical skills can be used to view popular media as well. Music videos and advertisements are great tools to use when teaching different types of fallacies and argument, or even the ideals of a particular era. Furthermore, having student consider whether or not characters in their favorite TV shows are autonomous actors can help them make the cognitive leap to examining their own lives.

While these are skills for students, teachers also need to be taught a similar critical eye. Teacher education programs and teacher educators should consider the way field experiences “encourage replication rather than critical questioning and transformation” (Sleeter, 2008). In Mr. Brown’s class, many of the stereotypes he had about adolescent girls and clothing were reinforced and passed on to students through classroom discussion. These ideas were even more damaging because he was such a beloved and knowledgeable teacher—our tendency as students was to believe and try to emulate him whenever possible. As shown by this analysis, student choice about clothing is much more complicated than a desire to read “slut” or wield sexual power. The complexities of dress and gender within school should be addressed and discussed
within teacher education classrooms. Perhaps an entire class on gender equitable teaching should be required—both students and instructors should be required to reflect on how they construct gender.

Furthermore, while I have been critical of the ideas Mr. Brown presented during his class, throughout the course of writing this paper I have been forced to reevaluate my own opinions regarding adolescent girls and dress. At the time of the class, I believed these characterizations were unfair because the girls didn’t know what they were doing—ignorance of what dressing in a sexy manner signaled to those around them caused girls to choose to short shorts, which in turn made them likely to receive less academic attention for fear of sexual harassment changes. Throughout the research and analysis process, I have come to the conclusion that assuming adolescent naivety is demeaning, Figtoo general, and colonizing. Again, student choice about clothing is quite complex. In congruence with third generation feminism, girls should actually have a choice and should be viewed as having a choice. This means understanding the implications of their different options, harking back to critical media literacy. The pervading problem is not the clothing itself, but lies with educators who change their behavior toward girls in short shorts and the underlying messages stifling and patrolling female sexuality within school systems.
REFERENCES


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