

**“We can wear any shirt that we want”:  
Girls’ Understanding, Negotiation and  
Resistance of Girlhood**

by

**Paulina Semenec**

B.A (Hons.), York University, 2004

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
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in the

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**Name:** Paulina Semenec  
**Degree:** Master of Arts  
**Title of Thesis:** *“We can wear any shirt that we want”:  
Girls’ understanding, negotiation and resistance of  
girlhood*

**Examining Committee:**

**Chair:** Dr. Celeste Snowber, Associate Professor

---

**Dr. Özlem Sensoy**  
Senior Supervisor  
Associate Professor

---

**Dr. Elizabeth Marshall**  
Supervisor  
Associate Professor

---

**Dr. Lisa Weems**  
External Examiner  
Associate Professor  
Department of Educational Leadership  
Miami University

**Date Defended/Approved:** May 31, 2012

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## **Abstract**

Currently, neo-liberal and postfeminist discourses position girls as “having it all”. Girls’ hyper-visibility in the media and in popular culture suggests that they “run the world”, and therefore no longer need feminism. At the same time, girls are also often positioned as in trouble and in need of saving, or ‘angry’ and in need of control. So how do girls understand what it means to be a girl in society today?

In this thesis, I attempt to answer this question as well as how girls negotiate and navigate the complex and often contradictory hegemonic discourses of girlhood. Finally, I seek to understand how girls both consciously and unconsciously resist mainstream representations of girlhood in ways that allow them to critique larger systems of oppression. I also explore the potential of using media production as a form of resistance among girls. In particular, I explore the question: What stories do young girls tell in their own media produced texts? Do these stories run counter to dominant discourses and images of girlhood or do they reproduce dominant discourses?

**Keywords:** neoliberalism; postfeminism; girlhood; resistance; youth produced media

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this thesis to the eight girls that participated in my study. This thesis would not have been possible without their wonderful insights, time and dedication they devoted to examining girlhood.

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# Chapter 1.

## Introduction

Take this pink ribbon off my eyes  
I'm exposed  
And it's no big surprise  
Don't you think I know  
Exactly where I stand  
This world is forcing me  
To hold your hand  
'Cause I'm just a girl, little 'ol me  
Don't let me out of your sight  
I'm just a girl, all pretty and petite  
So don't let me have any rights

(*Just a Girl* - No Doubt, 1995)

I was 15 years old when No Doubt's song *Just a Girl* became a hit on the radio. This song resonated with me, not only because of its catchy beat, but also because it allowed me to name and articulate some of the frustration I felt as a teenage girl. The expectations to be a certain *kind* of girl were made very clear to me- at home, in school, and in the media. Pressured to act, dress and look a certain way, I often felt confused about my role in society as a "girl". It was during this time, that I began to realize that the world "was never designed for women" (Aapola, Gonick & Harris, 2005, p.55) let alone for girls.

Just a couple years after this song came out, British pop sensation, the *Spice Girls* touted girl empowerment messages like "I'll tell you what I want what I really really want!" on radios worldwide. And while I was not a huge fan of the Spice Girls, I could not help but sing back, "So *tell me* what you want what you really really want!" Their fun and *girly* image appealed to me (even though I had always identified as a "tomboy")- they

were pretty, childish but independent, and most importantly, they made being a girl look like fun; they made it appear *empowering*.<sup>1</sup> Lyn Mikel Brown (2003) has suggested that:

girls of all ages are bombarded every day with subtle and not so subtle images and messages about what it means to be a girl—a tomboy, a girly girl, a bossy girl, a girl other girls want to be with, a girl boys like, a girl who's taken seriously, a beautiful girl, an athletic girl, a smart girl, a tough girl, a fighter. (p. 29)

These complex, and seemingly contradictory representations of girls and young women were a part of my every day reality growing up as a teen in Canada in the 1990's. At times these images seemed to go hand in hand. I could be tough in an all girl rock band, and still wear makeup that made me feel pretty. I could be athletic and wear baggy instead of tight, revealing clothes, and still feel satisfied with my body. Yet more often than not, these competing discourses caused me a lot of confusion between the kind of girl I felt I was *supposed* to be, and the kind of girl I felt that I believed I was. What did it mean to be a girl anyway?

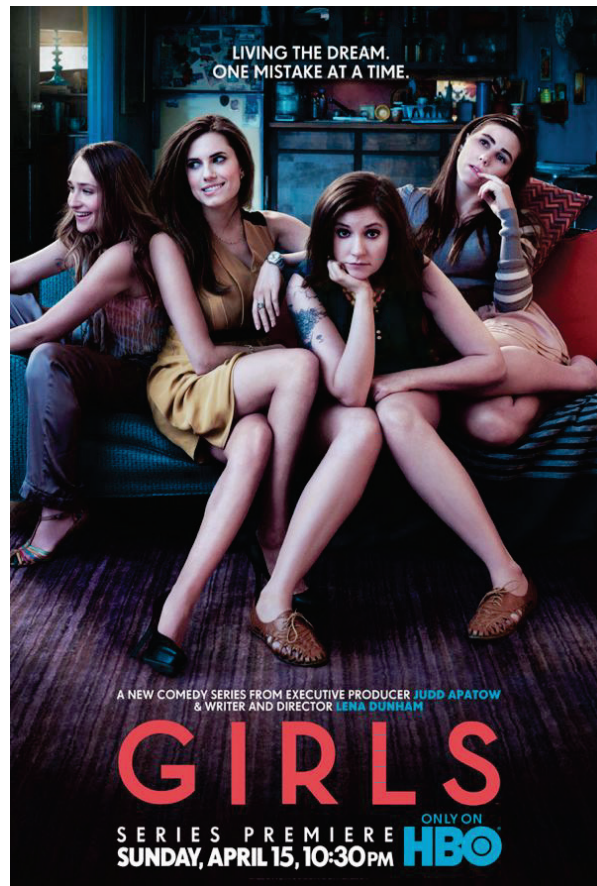
## I'm just a girl

What is a *girl*? And just as importantly, what does it *mean* to be a girl? These seemingly straightforward questions are in fact quite complex. Traditionally, the category of 'girl' meant that one was White, middle-class, heterosexual, thin, and able-bodied (Currie, Kelly, & Pomerantz, 2009), and one can still see strong examples of this kind of girlhood in the media and in popular culture.<sup>2</sup> However more recently, scholars have begun to challenge these static and problematic definitions of girls (for example: Zaslow, 2009; Currie et al., 2009; Pomerantz, 2009; Jiwani, 2006; Gonick, 2006b). The category

<sup>1</sup> I use the term *empowering* here to mean that girls have agency; that they can choose to be who and what they want as opposed to what society expects of them.

<sup>2</sup> For example, the television show "Girls" which first aired on HBO in April of 2012, illustrates how White girls are a stand in for girls in general. As a result, this show has been heavily criticized for its failure to represent a range of girls from different racial and class background (Figure 1).

of girls (and “girlhood”) today, especially in the academic literature, is defined as a *social construct* rather than a biological fact. As Catherine Driscoll (2002) has suggested, “girlhood is *made up* and girls are brought into existence in statements and knowledge about girls...” (p. 5, emphasis mine). Moreover, how girls construct their identities and experience the world is also highly dependent on their age, racial, ethnic, and class positions (among many other intersecting identity positions), otherwise known as *intersectionality* (Crenshaw, 1991; also see Jiwani, 2006 and Weems, 2009). In this study, I use the term ‘girl’ in a way that acknowledges it is a social construction as well as in a way that incorporates the notion of *intersectionality*. These ideas are critical in any examination of girls’ lives because they play a critical part in how girls’ experience what it *means* to be a girl.



**Figure 1.** HBO’s TV show “Girls”

Note: Is this what it means to be a girl?

## Why study girls?

Why study girls? Girlhood scholar Sherrie A. Inness (1998) has suggested that studying girls not only tells us about *girls*, but also about how girls are viewed by society as a whole. Furthermore, she claims that:

how girls are shaped and molded suggests a great deal about how a society views itself and how it sanctions or rewards certain behaviours. Studying girls and their cultures can reveal as much about adult culture as about children's culture. It is impossible to disconnect the two; they are intimately intertwined (p. 2-3).

So what do the current and popular representations in the media tell us about girls and about society at large? Looking at girls' hyper-visibility in the media and in popular culture, it would appear as though girls have somehow "made it". They are smart, successful, all the while remaining flawlessly beautiful. However, some scholars suggest that even though girls seemingly have a cornucopia of "choices" of who and what they can be in the world, they are more oppressed than in the past (Brumberg 1998), more sexually active and objectified (Azam, 2008; Durham 2008), more aggressive and angrier than ever before (Brown, 2003, Simmons, 2002). And while it has been shown that girls today are doing better academically than boys, girls' academic success has brought about a moral panic regarding boys' underachievement (see Aapola, Gonick and Harris, 2005). In addition, there are an astonishing number of products marketed to girls that seek to undermine their "new found" intelligence.<sup>3</sup>

Scholarship in the fields of education, media/cultural studies and feminist studies on the representations of women and girls in the media and popular culture suggest that while girls today are more visible, and apparently more "empowered" in society, representations of what it means to be a girl are complex, contradictory and can be

<sup>3</sup> For example, in 2011 a controversial t-shirt sold at JC Penny read: I'm too pretty to do homework so my brother has to do it for me (Figure 2).

damaging (Hains, 2012; Raby & Pomerantz, 2011; Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009, 2007; Zaslow 2009; Durham 2008, 1999; Harris 2004). For example, Anita Harris (2004) has suggested that girls are often positioned in one of two discourses—that of the “can do” girl or the “at risk” girl. Where “can-do” girls represent the “empowered”, consumption-oriented and educated girl, the “at risk” girls represent the teen mom, high school drop out and delinquent. These discourses help to frame and *construct* discussions about girls, and in particular, the kinds of girls that would fall under one category or the other. “Success” and “failure” in these categories is constructed as an *individual* choice rather than something that is regulated by ones’ racial/ethnic identity and class position as well as historical, political and economic forces (Harris, 2004). Thus, girls have to work *individually* in order to attain success, and if they do not, their failure is theirs, and theirs alone.



**Figure 2.** *I'm too pretty to do homework so my brother has to do it for me*

So how do girls negotiate and resist these complex discourses? Cultural studies scholars suggest that gaining skills in *critical media literacy* is one way in which individuals (and youth in particular) can begin to disseminate and *resist* media’s influence. Douglas Kellner (2009) suggests that critical media literacy skills can empower people to “become more critical of media culture, able to resist its power and

influence, and able to construct one's own meanings and cultural forms" (Kellner, p. 6). However, since the 21<sup>st</sup> century, scholars have also been interested in how *girls* are constructing their "own meanings" and representations (Hains, 2012; Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009; Zaslow, 2009; Kearney, 2008; Bloustien, 2003).

As Dawn Currie, Deirdre Kelly & Shauna Pomerantz (2009) suggest, girls have an *active* role in the creation of their own identities, a practice they refer to as "doing girlhood" (p. 3). Studies also illustrate girls' resistance to dominant discourses of girlhood through their subversive cultural practices, such as zine-making and other forms of media production (Piepmeier, 2009; Kearney, 2006; Schilt, 2002). For example, in her ethnographic study of girl-produced media, Mary Celeste Kearney (2006) suggests that girl-produced media "should not go ignored" (p. 3). She argues that for girls, gaining the skills to think critically about media messages is crucial because not only do popular representations of girlhood have "little to do with [girls'] identities and experiences," these representations are mainly created and controlled by men (Kearney, p. 13). In addition, she writes that "When girls invest in the role of media producer, stereotypical notions of girlhood and girls' culture are altered radically, and so is the popular understanding of media production, an activity historically constructed as adult—and male oriented" (p. 12). This is extremely important, as girls have traditionally been assigned the role of cultural *consumers* rather than cultural producers (Kearney 2006; also Bloustien 2003).

## **Purpose of Study**

This thesis explores how young girls understand, negotiate and resist mainstream representations of girlhood. The main questions guiding this inquiry are:

- How do girls understand what it means to be a girl? How do they negotiate and resist the complex and often contradictory discourses of girlhood?

Also, in recognizing the transgressive potential of media production among youth, I wish to examine how, through the creation of their own film, girls can carve out a



space to create their own version of girlhood. In particular, I wish to examine the following question related to girls' media production:

- What stories do girls tell in their own media produced texts? Do these stories run counter to dominant discourses and images of girlhood or do they reproduce dominant discourses?

For this thesis, I conducted interviews with eight girls who expressed an interest in exploring issues of identity, girlhood, and feminism, and how media and popular culture shape their ideas about these concepts. In order to participate in this study, the girls also had to have an interest in creating their own film. In particular, I asked the girls to create a film in response to the following question:

- What does it mean to be a girl in today's society?

By interviewing these girls, I hoped to gain a better understanding of how girls come to understand their identities as *girls* in a time that is heavily invested in producing (and reproducing) specific ideas about "girlhood". In the next chapter, I will review the key literature that will help contextualize the question of how girls understand, negotiate and resist dominant discourses of girlhood.

## Chapter 2.

### Literature Review

Since the early 1990's there has been a heightened interest in the lives of girls. Prior to this time, the lives of girls went largely ignored by theorists and educators who focused primarily on boys (McRobbie 2000; Gilligan 1982; Pipher 1994). As Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber pointed out in 1976, girls were invisible in "subcultural ethnographic studies, the pop histories, the personal and the journalistic surveys in the field" (p. 12). Furthermore, they argued that "when [girls] do appear, it is either in ways which uncritically reinforce the stereotypical image of woman...or else they are fleetingly and marginally represented" (Ibid). However, since the late 21<sup>st</sup> century girls' visibility occupies every nook and cranny of social, cultural and political life. It has even been suggested that today, girls are "one of the most talked about and delineated social categories in North America" (Pomerantz, 2009, p. 149). As a result of this fascination with "all things girl", scholars have been interested in examining how girls make sense of their own lives and how they construct their identities in a neoliberal and postfeminist culture that continually places them in the spotlight.

I have organized this review thematically into the four following themes:

- Defining "girls"
- Popular discourses on girlhood
- Girls and forms of resistance
- Girl-produced media

In this chapter, I highlight some of the important theoretical as well as empirical scholarship that will provide a useful background to the current study.

## Defining “girls”

In 1949, Simone de Beauvoir wrote, “one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one” (Cited in Butler 2006, p.1). This idea has influenced research on girls because it reinforces the notion that the gender category of girl must be understood as a *social construct*, rather than a natural condition (Brown 2011; Pomerantz, 2009; Jiwani 2006; Aapola, Gonick & Harris, 2005). Framed by postmodern, Marxist and social constructivist theories, the idea that our identities are not “fixed” but rather constantly in flux has influenced much of the more recent literature on girls that seeks to problematize simple/binary constructions of girlhood (Zaslow 2009, also Pomerantz 2009).

Research on girls also strongly disputes the idea of a *universal* girlhood (Brown 2011; Aapola, Gonick & Harris, 2005; Jiwani 2006). As Yasmin Jiwani (2006) points out, the word “girl” is “highly context specific” (p. x) and that “coupled with often contradictory meanings” the word “girl” is a far more complicated word and identity than is usually acknowledged (Ibid). Furthermore, Jiwani’s discussion of girls is informed by the concept of intersectionality, which focuses on how intersecting identities create a particular girl’s identity. Jiwani argues that “[constructions] of femininities are not only mediated by, but also determined by issues of race, class, ability and sexuality” (p.xiii). In a similar way McRobbie (2000) has argued that “it is virtually impossible to detach the category of young women from the ways in which social class and ethnicity intersect with, cut across and give distinctive and material shape to what it means to be young and female” (p. 198). In this approach, the category of *girl* is forced to move away from the “White, middle-class, heterosexual, and able-bodied” girl, that has dominated much of the earlier research (Aapola, Gonick, & Harris, 2005; also see: Bettie, 2003; Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009)

Marion Brown (2011) also suggests that girls are not simply produced individually. Instead, she argues that “being a girl is individually and collectively produced and reproduced, always shifting, neither static nor linear” (p.109). Recognizing this, many scholars have adopted a feminist poststructuralist lens in their discussions of girls (see Pomerantz 2009; Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009, Marshall, 2004). Rather than defining the girl as a particular category, this perspective allows for a more fluid and complex understanding of how the category of “girls” comes to be in the first place. As

Shauna Pomerantz explains, this framework allows her to “move beyond definitions altogether” and helps her to “locate the “girl” within multiple and competing discourses that have culminated in a body of knowledge on “who” girls are and how they are allowed to “be” in North American society (p. 148). How girls are allowed to “be” in North American society is often dictated by popular discourses of girlhood. Stuart Hall (1996), has suggested that discourses are important because “as a group of statements which provide a language for talking about...representing—a particular kind of knowledge about a topic” (Hall 1996, in Taft, 2004 p. 69). It is therefore important to examine popular discourses of girlhood because while they often create possibilities for how girls can live in the world, they also have the power to limit both how girls see themselves, as well as how others see them.

Feminist poststructuralism has also created new ways of thinking about and understanding how girls “talk about” what it means to be a girl. Because the discourses girls negotiate are themselves contradictory and complex, contradictions in how girls conceptualize what it means to be a girl are common in research with girls (Pomerantz and Raby 2011; Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009; Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz, 2007). For example, Shauna Pomerantz and Rebecca Raby (2011) suggest that contradictions in girls’ talk are consistent when viewed through the lens of feminist post-structuralism because they acknowledge the complex and contradictory nature of one’s identity. Their study (2011) with “smart” girls revealed that girls’ relied on a neoliberal and postfeminist discourse to describe their experiences as girls by touting the importance of individuality and personal choice. And while they often acknowledged instances of gender inequality, the girls in their study quickly reverted back to stating that they were empowered and could achieve anything they wanted if they worked hard. However, these contradictions are not viewed as problematic when viewed within a feminist poststructural framework, because as Raby and Pomerantz (2011) suggest, these contradictions “showcase the complexity of everyday life for girls...” (558). As I have shown in this section, the socially constructed category of ‘girl’ cannot be taken for granted as a simple identity category. In the next section, I detail two popular discourses that have informed popular understandings of girlhood.

## Popular discourses on girlhood

### ***“Saplings in a hurricane”***

The second strand of literature that informs this thesis is the research examining popular discourses about girls in popular culture. Two popular discourses have informed much of what is understood about girls today—the “Ophelia” discourse (Aapola, Gonick and Harris 2005, see also Marshall, 2007) and the “girl power” discourse. I will briefly discuss these two discourses and then detail some of the empirical work that has examined how these discourses manifest themselves in girls’ lives.

Often referred to as the “Ophelia” discourse (Aapola, Gonick & Harris, 2005), this discourse positions girls as helpless victims of a culture that “poisons” them (Pipher, 1994). Written with the intention of giving girls their own “voice”, Mary Pipher’s (1994) book *Reviving Ophelia* and Peggy Orenstein’s (1994) book *Schoolgirls* brought the hidden lives of girls into the mainstream.<sup>4</sup> In particular, these “Ophelia narratives” (Marshall, 2007) highlighted girls’ low-self esteem, faltering self-confidence, low self-worth, as well as their struggles with depression, self-harm, and drugs. Influenced by the 1991 report *Shortchanging girls, Shortchanging America* (1991) Orenstein’s own findings (1994) illustrated that girls “emerge from their teenage years with reduced expectations and have less confidence in themselves and their abilities than do boys” (p. xvi). Furthermore, she added that, “Teenage girls are more vulnerable to feelings of depression and hopelessness and are four times more likely to attempt suicide” (Ibid). Pipher (1995) who used the term, “saplings in a hurricane” (p.22) to describe teenage girls, suggested that at this critical point in their lives, girls struggle with their “authentic selves” (Ibid) because they grow up in a “girl-poisoning culture” (p. 12) that sexualizes and exploits them at a young age. This discourse, and the abundance of literature and

<sup>4</sup> Around this time, girls also became sites of international concern. The United Nations Conference on Women in 1995 specifically focused on issues of the “girl-child” and outlined specific government actions that needed to be taken in order to eradicate various forms of inequality and discrimination faced by young girls around the world.

media attention girls received as a result, exemplified that scholars and journalists were indeed “listening to young girls” (Brown 1991, p.73). Programs and policies were set in place that sought to ensure girls were being heard, and to a certain extent, “protected” from the dangerous culture they were living in.<sup>5</sup>

However, scholars have been critical of this discourse because it spawned an interest in what culture was doing *to* girls instead of acknowledging that girls too, played a role in creating and recreating culture (for example: Hains 2012, Marshall, 2007, Bettie, 2003). As Rebecca Hains (2012) simply remarked, the Ophelia discourse “failed to recognize that girls can have agency” (p. 12). The sheer volume of books that were published for parents of troubled daughters in mind, illustrated this notion that girls *needed* saving. Even today, books like Gigi Durham’s (2008) *The Lolita Effect*, and *Packaging Girlhood*, written by Sharon Lamb and Lyn Mikel Brown (2006), target the parents of daughters who are believed to need rescuing from the perceived poisonous culture of mass marketing and advertising.

### ***Girl power!***

Operating around the same time as the “Ophelia” discourse, the “girl power” discourse positioned girls as empowered rather than in need of saving. The notion of girl power, which was rooted in the Riot Grrrl scene, became quickly co-opted by the mainstream media that sought to capitalize on this new “brand” of girl empowerment (for good discussions see Hains, 2012; Zaslow, 2009; Kearney 2006; Aapola, Gonick & Harris, 2005). As Emilie Zaslow (2009) suggests, the political messages of the Riot Grrrls were undermined, and turned into a kind of “commodity feminism” (p. 31). This new kind of “feminism” suggested that girls could be ‘empowered’ through the

<sup>5</sup> Hains (2012) also provides a good discussion of several outcomes following the publication of the American Association of University Women (AAUW) report, *How Schools Shortchange Girls*.<sup>5</sup>

consumption of 'girl power' products, such as t-shirts and other (glittery) paraphernalia. Commodity feminism thus replaced a girl power culture that was created *by girls for girls*, with a girl power culture that was created simply *for girls* through the mass marketing of products. As many scholars have shown (Hains, 2012; Zaslow, 2009; Aapola, Gonick & Harris, 2005; Budgeon, 1998), the emergence of the Spice Girls played a pivotal role in redefining, (and diluting) the initial girl power movement which included a strong critique of patriarchy, sexism, racism, and other forms of oppression in girls' lives.

So, like the Ophelia discourse, the girl power discourse has also been critiqued. Jessica Taft (2004) for example, argues that the notion of girl power is antifeminist, consumption oriented, and highly individualistic. In turn, girl power makes feminism appear redundant and undesirable in girls' lives through the discourse of postfeminism. As Taft suggests, the discourse of girl power defines "girls as noncritical, nonactive subjects" (p.70). While the discourse of girl power is not always painted in such a harsh light, many girlhood scholars do agree that girl power problematically evokes feminism as something of the past. According to McRobbie (2009) postfeminism:

positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of meanings which emphasize that it [feminism] is no longer needed, it is a spent force (p. 411).

What is important to note, is that these two popular discourses, have helped shape current mis/conceptions about girls. Aapola, Gonick and Harris (2005) suggest that examining these two popular discourses of girlhood is important because it "enables us to think and ask questions about how certain meanings of girlhood become common sense and "authoritative"" (p. 18). Also, because popular discourses about girls allow us to "*judge* girls, to *think* about them, to *talk* about them, and to *categorize* them" (Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009, p. 47) discourses are "both enabling and constraining" (Aapola, Gonick & Harris 2005, p.19). By examining these popular discourses, we can better understand what they "leave out, marginalize or prohibit from being included in the issues and debates surrounding what it means to be a young woman in these times and places" (Ibid). What these discourses leave out, Pomerantz (2009) suggests, is a more complex understanding of girls. In particular, these binary discourses fail to acknowledge how the intersections of race, class, ethnicity and religion play out in girls' lives, and

therefore need to be abandoned, because there is no “right” or “wrong” kind of girlhood” (Pomerantz, 2009). However, given the prevalence of the girl power discourse in the media and popular culture, researchers have been curious as to how girls define and understand “girl power” in their own lives. In the next section, I outline what some of the empirical literature has shown about girls’ engagements with the girl power discourse.

### ***Girl power in girls’ lives***

Many scholars have argued that there is a shortage of literature that explores girls’ complex engagements with the culture around them (Hains, 2012; Kearney, 2011; Zaslow, 2009; Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009; Budgeon, 1998). In particular, these scholars have argued that the literature has tended to privilege *scholars’* analysis of girl’s culture, rather than *girls’* own interpretations. This “imbalance in the literature” is problematic because as Hains (2012) argues, “When girls are spoken *for*, instead of *with*, only a partial, flawed story can emerge” (p. 50). In this section, I outline some of the work that has attended to this gap in the literature, with a specific focus on the work that has addressed how girls negotiate and resist the popular ‘girl power’ discourse in their own lives.

In her article, “*I’ll tell you what I really, really want*”: *Girl power and self-identity in Britain*, Shelley Budgeon (1998) explored how, in the midst of the girl power phenomenon, young women in Britain took up and resisted the popular discourse of girl power. As Budgeon illustrated, many of the young women in her study regularly evoked the ‘girl power’/postfeminist discourse which positions feminism as no longer necessary. Privileging “self-determination” over collective action, many of the young women expressed the need to be strong, authentic and “true to oneself” (p. 122). And while they often acknowledged the existence of sexism, the young women in her study did not feel that sexism had affected their lives *personally*. As Budgeon explained, they described gender inequality in only “general terms, not as a personal experience” (p. 133). In turn, they did not align themselves with feminism, because as Budgeon observed, it “has no viability for them. They do not see it [feminism] as a place they can occupy” (p. 128). According to Budgeon, the positioning of young women outside of feminism (while simultaneously acknowledging gender inequality) is problematic because it places the



burden of social change on the *individual*, thus undermining the gains made by the second wave feminist movement.

At the same time, Budgeon's study was important in highlighting how young women critically evaluate, and negotiate societal expectations regarding the more traditional forms of femininity (such as staying at home, having children), with the more progressive representations that position girls and women as more independent and career-minded. Budgeon concluded by suggesting that "what it means to be a woman" is very complex and contradictory, but that for the participants in her study, "it meant being whoever you want to be" (p. 140). These findings were significant, because as I will illustrate, although they are over a decade old, they still have relevance for more current studies on girls' conceptualizations of girl power and feminism today.

Written many years after the Spice Girls' reign in popular culture, Rebecca Hains (2012) explores whether or not growing up with the Spice Girls' version of 'girl power' was in fact as damaging as many scholars had previously suggested. In her book, *Growing up with girl power*, Hains interviewed young women who grew up with the discourse of girl power, but who *also* identified as feminists. Asking whether the Spice Girls' "inculcated [girls] against feminism" (p.49), Hains' findings suggest that girls' engagements with the girl power discourse were neither *good*, nor *bad*. As Hains explains, for some girls in her study the Spice Girls were remembered with fond memories, and that Spice Girl "play" (pretending to be the one of the Spice Girls) was often a "pleasurable childhood activity" (p.55). Furthermore, she noted that many of the girls had fond memories of *consuming* Spice Girl products such as candy and pens. As one girl in her study remembered, "I loved them"...I'd always write 'girl power'...I even had the lollipops" (in Hains, p. 57). On the other hand, girls who could not afford to purchase 'girl power' products, or girls who did not look like one of the Spice Girls were excluded from participating in this discourse in the same way. These findings also echo earlier findings regarding how girls understand and negotiate the Spice/girl power discourse (see Lemish, 1998).

Another important finding in Hains' study was that the Spice Girls' neoliberal version of girl power actually introduced some of the girls to feminism, as well as to the subcultural feminist Riot Grrrl movement. As Hains observed, "Far from being a feminist

anathema, several [girls] indicated the Spice Girls' mode of girl power had positive benefits, serving as a pathway to feminism or deeper feminism" (p. 68). This finding is significant because it complicates the oversimplified notion of girl power as being either good or bad for girls, and illustrates that the discourse of girl power does not necessarily make girls "noncritical, nonactive subjects" (Taft, 2004, p. 70). On the contrary, Hains' participants' complex negotiations with the girl power discourse proved to be transgressive and transformative.

Similar to Hains' study, Emilie Zaslow (2009) focused on how girls who grew up in "girl power media culture" make sense of what it means to have 'girl power', and in particular, how girls "negotiate the inherently contradictory messages" of this discourse (p.32). As Zaslow's study revealed, the girls in her study engaged with not only popular culture texts in complex (and often contradictory ways), but also with popular discourses that position them as 'can do' girls (Harris, 2004). For example, in her discussions about girls' visions of their future, she found that they often evoked the neoliberal discourse that privileges *individual* achievement. Many of the inner-city girls in her study cited examples of popular 'celebrity moms' as proof that one can have 'it all'—a successful career, children, all without any support from others, including men. As Zaslow observed, in both her interviews with the inner-city and middle-class girls, "collective or community work" had no role to play in girls' envisioning of their futures. For many of these girls, individual strength, resilience and a 'can do' attitude was also how they envisioned feminism.

As Zaslow observed, for these girls feminism was more about one's attitude, or "performance of an identity" (p. 146). However, despite numerous studies that suggest girls are no longer invested in feminism, all but *one* of her participants in Zaslow's study expressed their belief that feminism was still necessary. At the same time, Zaslow points out that they did not relate to feminism as a *movement*, but were "involved in movements they considered to be pertinent for their generation, such as environmental concerns" (p. 135). This she argues, is due to their vision of feminism to be about "individual change and achievement rather than collective social change" (Ibid). So if girls do not see feminism as a movement for social change, how can they resist gender inequality in their own lives?

In their ethnographic research with 71 girls, Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz (2009) looked at ““alternative”<sup>6</sup> ways of doing girlhood” (p. 59). Specifically, they were interested in how “Skater girls”, as well as girls who engaged in online activities, transgressed traditional femininity by moving into traditionally male spaces. As they describe, the Skater girls in their study:

Demonstrated an embodied resistance to a form of femininity that they saw as detrimental to girlhood itself. In order to differentiate their gender practices from conventional femininity, as well as to skate comfortably, Skater girls dressed casually, avoided wearing makeup, and did not engage in sexualized display through style. They also spoke their minds and did not pretend to be “ditzzy”. Most importantly, they did not feign the need for skater boy assistance (p. 118).

The Skater girls’ resistance then, can be read as emerging out of a feminist politics. The Skater girls often challenged the skater boys’ overt sexism and sense of entitlement in the skater world and also challenged notions about how girls are supposed to look and behave through their adoption of a style that did not conform to traditional discourses of femininity. However, what Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz (2009) found was that the skater girls more often than not relied on the discourse of postfeminism instead of feminism. This was exemplified by some of the girls who suggested that “it’s pretty much even with guys now”, “I always thought being a feminist was kind of silly” (p. 127) as well as others who claimed that feminism “goes too far” (p. 113).

Their study also examined the pleasure girls derived from gender bending in online environments. As they suggest, online spaces can provide a space where girls can resist because it allows them to “express themselves...in ways not possible at school” (p. 140). However what they found was that the *rules* of gender were often heavily policed by others in these virtual spaces. For example, the “online girls” in their

<sup>6</sup> Currie et al., 2009 use the term “alternative” to “capture a range of ways that girls consciously positioned themselves *against* what they perceived as the “mainstream” in youth culture, in general, and conventional femininity in particular (p. 111-112, emphasis mine).

study found that their refusal to follow “gendered” scripts in online role-playing games often resulted in the “death” of their online character by other players. Furthermore, girls often engaged in role-play as *male* characters in order to avoid stereotypical comments about girls’ inability to be tough online. Thus, the Skater and Online girls who wished to transgress the traditional boundaries of girlhood were often penalized or ridiculed, in both real and online spaces.

What these studies indicate is that girls today negotiate and resist feminism and the discourse of girl power in complex ways. While it is too simple to rely on binary constructions of girl power as either *good* or *bad* for girls, what is evident is that girls are heavily invested in the neoliberal, and postfeminist discourses. What many of these authors have argued is that these discourses do not provide girls with the language that would enable them to articulate inequality, nor the tools to work for collective social change (Zaslow, 2009; Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009, Budgeon; 1998). In the next section, I will outline some of the literature that pertains more specifically to girls’ resistance.

## **Girls and Forms of Resistance**

If girls do not have the language to articulate gender inequality, nor a mindset in which they believe that working collectively for social justice is necessary or desired, how do they resist dominant discourses of girlhood? Can they?

As the literature on resistance suggests, *resistance* is often difficult to define. In her discussion of teen girl resistance for example, Rebecca Raby (2006, also Raby 2005) argues that the term “resistance” needs to be used carefully. She writes that because it is “used so broadly, it is diluted: if resistance is everywhere, then what is not resistance?” (p. 138). In media and cultural studies, the term *resistance* is often used to describe an oppositional stance towards dominant media messages. Stuart Hall, who coined the term *oppositional readings*, has suggested that audiences have three ways of

"reading a media text.<sup>7</sup> In an *oppositional* reading, audiences completely resist the intended message by the creator (coder) of that particular message. Douglas Kellner (2009) however has warned against romanticizing resistance, and suggests instead that "distinctions must be made as to whether the resistance ...in a given experience is progressive or reactionary, emancipatory, or destructive" (p. 17). This echoes Henry Giroux's concerns regarding the efficacy of oppositional behavior. As he has argued, "not all oppositional behavior has 'radical significance', nor is all oppositional behavior a clear cut response to domination" (Giroux 1983, p.285, cited in Raby, 2005, p.157).

Critical media educators however, (see Kellner, 2009) suggest that gaining skills in *critical media literacy* is one way in which individuals (and youth in particular) can begin to disseminate and resist media's influence. Kellner (2009) suggests that gaining skills in media literacy can empower individuals to "become more critical of media culture, able to resist its power and influence, and able to construct one's own meanings of cultural forms" (p. 6). This has important implications for the study of girls' resistance, because by gaining skills in media literacy, girls can become not only more critical of media messages that depict them in limiting ways, but also active producers of their own visions of girlhood.

However, in her study of teen girl resistance to patriarchal discourses in popular culture, Gigi Durham (1999) argues that discussions of teen girl resistance must move away from the male constructed/androcentric concept of "resistant reading" that is often used in media literacy, to a more *collective* kind of resistance that "would bring resistant girls into a secure place in the world and among their peers, instead of leaving them seething and marginalized in a world that ostracizes and hurts girls who rebel" (p. 223). Furthermore, because peer relationships have been found to be of significant importance for girls during adolescence, Durham argues that it is:

<sup>7</sup> In the first, or "dominant" reading, viewers accept the messages that were intended by the coder of those messages. In the second, or "negotiated" reading of a text, viewers accept some aspect of the message, but disregard or reject others. "Text" also does not only refer to a written text, like a book, but can include movies, images in magazines, etc.

unreasonable to expect adolescent girls—who are developmentally at a life stage in which social and peer approval are of paramount importance—to be able to produce individually oppositional readings of media messages that would translate into a coherent and robust lived opposition (Durham, 1999, p. 222).

Thus, Durham argues that “any theory of girls’ resistance to patriarchal media messages must acknowledge the centrality of relationship and connection in girls’ culture.

Brown (1998) has argued that at the start of adolescence, girls (particularly middle-class White girls) often *silence* their own voices instead of resist. In particular, she suggests that around age eleven and twelve, girls begin to “see the patriarchal framework for the first time and name its effects on their lives: they would have to narrow their feelings and modulate their voices if they were to make a smooth transition into the dominant culture” (p. x). Furthermore, as girls learn what society expects of them, they silence much of the anger they may feel at realizing their subordinate position in society, and therefore have few avenues for resistance. As Brown poignantly argues, “Without anger there is no impetus to act against any injustice done to [girls]. If we take away girls’ anger, then, we take away the foundation for women’s political resistance” (p. 13). This brings up important questions for girls’ resistance. As the literature suggests, girls often cite feeling empowered and on an equal footing with men. So, if everything is “equal” between the sexes, it would seem that there would be no need for girls to resist popular discourses of girlhood. At the same time, the literature reveals that girls often *do* express frustrations at the gender inequality they experience. Yet, if anger and “conventional femininity are subversive of each other” (Brown, 1998, p. 12), where do girls find the space to resist?

## **Girl Produced Media**

There is a growing interest in the literature regarding media production among youth, especially media production among girls (Kearney, 2011; Kearney, 2006; Bloustien, 2003; Schilt, 2003). The work of Mary Celeste Kearney in particular has been significant in challenging the notion that girls are merely media *consumers*. In her book,

*Girls Make Media* (2006), Kearney examines the various forms of media production that girls are involved in such as zine-making, creating websites, and filmmaking, thus illustrating girls' active involvement as media *producers*. According to Kearney, media production is important because it reveals girls' "resistance to dominant constructions of girlhood" as well as girls' "interests in exploring nontraditional forms of young female identity" (p. 136). As the "primary type of media created by contemporary American girls" (Ibid), girl produced zines have received much attention in the literature (Piepmeier, 2009; Kearney, 2006; Harris, 2004; Schilt, 2003).

For example, in her examination of girl-produced zines, Kristin Schilt (2003) suggests that because zines are not created with an adult audience in mind, and because the girls who produce them remain anonymous, they provide girls with a "space" in which they can express themselves, "without fear of ridicule or censure" (p. 79). Furthermore, adopting Gilligan et al.'s (1995) concept of overt and covert resistance, Schilt argues that zines function as a form of "c/overt resistance" (p. 81) that can provide an important space for girls to develop their ideas about feminism and even possibly move to more "overt [spaces] of feminist activism" (p.83). Moreover, zines can enable girls to resist the neoliberal, consumerist culture they are immersed in.

As Harris (2004) has argued, through the creation of zines, culture jamming and other forms of activism, girls challenge what she calls "consumer citizenship". According to Harris, consumer citizenship highlights girls' "power" through their consumption in the neoliberal marketplace. However, through cultural activism, girls can transgress this neoliberal discourse through the production (rather than consumption) of their *own* cultural texts, outside of the realm of mainstream, consumer culture.

Examples of some media texts that fall outside of mainstream consumer culture are rare, but important to note. For instance, the non-profit Canadian magazine *Shameless*, while not created by youth, provides youth with a brief refuge from traditional magazines. The editorial content in *Shameless* is "guided by a teen advisory board" and thus addresses many of the issues youth care and are concerned about. Another publication intended for youth audiences is, *New Moon*. Free from advertisements, this publication seeks to engage girls with positive and educational messages about girlhood. These alternative media texts, along with girl-produced zines

provide girls with a creative space for self-exploration, and unlike traditional magazines, challenge popular representations of girlhood.

Scholars have also been interested in girls' online activity, particularly girl's active engagement through activities like web design, blogging and role-play (for example: Kearney, 2006; Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz). As these scholars suggest, online spaces can provide girls with spaces in which to explore non-conventional forms of femininity. However, there is a gap in the literature regarding other forms of media production among girls, namely film production. One well-cited example is Gerry Bloustien's (2003) ethnographic study in which she gave her participants video cameras to document their lives over a fifteen month period. What Bloustien found was that the girls in her study used the camcorder to record personal or risky aspects of their lives, thus suggesting that through film, spaces for girls to experiment with their identities were made possible. This is in line with Kearney's (2006) observation regarding the transformational possibilities of girl-produced films:

...girls who are using film and video cameras to record their stories, experiences, dreams, and fears, are at the very least, transforming girlhood and female youth culture. For, by using a form of media that makes visible the unseen and audible the unheard, these directors are expanding considerably girls' public representation, complicating the stories with their demographic group, and challenging stereotypes of female youth as technically ignorant and culturally unproductive (p. 237).

The sheer number of transgressive videos on YouTube alone is testament to the power of film production for girls. Videos like "*slut shaming and why it's wrong*" posted by astrorice, a critique of Beyonce's 2011 hit, *Run the world (Girls)* by NineteenPercent, as well as the more satirical videos posted by JennaMarbles, have between half a million to ten million views on YouTube. So why is there such a shortage in the literature exploring this area? Kearney (2006) argues that:

The burgeoning field of girl-made movies presents several problems for scholars wanting to study such texts. Most significantly, despite the recent increase in girl directors, filmmaking is not yet practiced by as great a number of female youth as other forms of media production, such as zinemaking. As a result, the current pool of girls' films is not large enough to make arguments about such texts' common narrative and aesthetic styles, if indeed such similarities exist (p. 212).



Thus, a part of my goal in this study is to add to the production and the analysis of a growing number of girl-produced films. Furthermore, it has been noted that studies tend to privilege the study of girls' media texts over the study of girl audiences (Hains, 2012, p. 50), and so by interviewing girls about 'what it means to be a girl' as well as engaging them in a form of media production, I wish to attend to these gaps in the literature. By bridging these two areas, I hope to add to literature in girlhood studies, as well as media literacy, in order to better understand how as both media consumers *and* media producers, girls make meaning of what it means to be a girl in these complex and contradictory times.

The research questions guiding this study are: *How do girls understand, negotiate and resist dominant discourses of girlhood? What stories do they tell in their own media produced "texts" about what it means to be a girl, and do these stories challenge or reproduce dominant discourses of girlhood?*

In the following chapter, I outline my methodology in conducting this study. In particular, I outline the procedure I used to recruit my participants and the steps I took to ensure their anonymity. I also outline my approach to collecting and analyzing my interview data as well as my approach to ensuring the validity of the research findings.

## **Chapter 3.**

### **Methodology**

The main goals of this study were to examine how young girls understand, negotiate and resist dominant representations of girlhood. A secondary goal of this study was to determine the extent to which participation in the creation of media texts about girlhood (in this case, a film), served as a channel for resistance. For this study, 8 girls between the ages of 15-18 were interviewed, and created their own short films. In this chapter, I will discuss my research methodology, the details of my data collection process and data analysis techniques used in this study.

### **Ethics and Informed Consent**

This study, after having been reviewed by the Simon Fraser University (SFU) Board of Ethics, was deemed as “minimal risk”. According to policy 6.1 a, “minimal risk in research occurs when "potential subjects can reasonably be expected to regard the probability and magnitude of possible harms incurred by participating in the research to be no greater than those encountered by the subject in those aspects of his or her everyday life" (SFU, 2008, Policy 6.1 a). I also tried to ensure that my participants (as well as their guardians) were well informed of my study, and that they felt comfortable throughout the research process. I made an effort to ensure that the participants did not have to commute far from their homes to meet for interviews, and also tried to limit the interviews to an hour, so as not to interfere with the girls’ other activities and responsibilities.

As all of the participants in the study were under 19 years of age, I sought written and verbal permission from both the girls in the study, as well as their guardian(s). During the first meeting, participants were asked to bring the signed Consent Forms (see in Appendix A & B), and then their guardians were subsequently called in order to

confirm that they had in fact given their child consent to participate in the study. Six of the guardians were contacted by phone, and two of the guardians were met in person during the interview process, where I established verbal consent. Guardians were also asked if they had any questions or concerns about the project, in order to ensure that they knew how and why the study was being conducted.

## **Participant Recruitment**

In the summer of 2011, I was a volunteer with Reel Youth<sup>8</sup> and the Passion Foundation<sup>9</sup> as part of the Care to Change Film Contest. I approached several of the young female participants in this group regarding my thesis work and got the contact information for the girls who were interested in being a part of the study. From this group, I successfully recruited two girls to participate in this study, and used a snowball technique to recruit the remaining participants. An employee from the Passion Foundation contacted her sister, a high school teacher in Surrey, and informed her of this study. I was put in contact with this instructor, and was able to recruit three girls for this study. The remaining three participants were recruited through another teacher contact I had in a high school in Burnaby. Once I had received the contact information for the students nominated, I sent them copies of the Consent Forms (see Appendix A and B).

In order to participate in the study, the participants had to have an interest in media and popular culture, and be able to commit to creating their own film regarding what it means to be a girl. They also had to be able to commit to at least 6-8 weeks to the project, and be available for at least two interviews, either individually or with a friend. Furthermore, participants were selected on their willingness to discuss issues of

<sup>8</sup> Reel Youth is a non-profit organization in Vancouver, BC. It seeks to empower youth (as well as adults) in creating their own media as a means for empowerment. See: [www.reelyouth.ca](http://www.reelyouth.ca)

<sup>9</sup> The Passion Foundation is a charity based out of Vancouver, BC. The goal of the Passion Foundation is to empower girls and young women build confidence and “find their life’s passion”. See: [passionfoundation.org](http://passionfoundation.org)

identity, feminism and girl power as well as media and popular culture. Five of the participants that were interviewed had prior experience with film making and editing, either as part of a school project, or out of their own interest, and expressed a keen interest in creating their own film as part of the project.

## Method

In order to best answer how girls understand, negotiate and resist what it means to be a girl, I employed a qualitative approach. According to Creswell (2007), qualitative research is appropriate when “we want to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships that often exist between a researcher and the participants in the study” (p. 40). Because I was interested in hearing how young girls understand, interpret, and resist dominant discourses of girlhood, I felt that a qualitative approach exploring a smaller sample of participants’ ideas more deeply would be most suitable for this study. Denzin and Lincoln (2003) define qualitative researchers as seeking “answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning” (p. 13). Research in the field of girlhood studies suggests that although young girls often have a lot to say about their experiences, they are often limited from speaking out about these experiences (Zaslow, 2009).

Within a qualitative approach, my research is informed by strategies from visual methodologies in order to better answer the question, “what stories do girls tell in their media texts?” Put simply, visual research is “concerned with the production, organization and interpretation of imagery” (Prosser & Loxley, in Hartas 2010, p. 200). Because youth live in an increasingly visual world (Marshall & Sensoy, 2011) visual methodology is an increasingly useful form of social research especially with youth. Prosser and Loxley cite several benefits to visual methods in research, among them being the notion that “they build bridges between researchers and the researched and are less threatening than words/numbers-based methods and are thus empowering” (In Hartas, p. 202). On a similar note, Douglas Harper (2002) has suggested that as part of visual methods, photo elicitation can inspire collaboration among researchers and participants and that this process may “lead an individual to a new view of their social existence” (p. 21). Through the photo elicitation of popular teen magazines I brought to the interviews, I was hoping

to understand how my participants understand, interpret and resist popular media texts about girlhood.

I also decided to adopt a visual approach because I am interested in the kinds of things that are produced *about* girls as much as about what girls *themselves* produce in their own cultural, social and political environments. My goal was to include the girls in the research process through creating their own meaning (in their films) about what it means to be a girl. I wanted them to take something away from the research experience, something they themselves have created. As Thompson (2008) suggests “when children and young people are themselves engaged in visual research, they also seem to take pleasure in the process” because they feel they are “getting something out of their participation” (p. 11).

My broadly defined qualitative strategies are also informed by a feminist conceptual framework in which I sought to “establish collaborative and nonexploitative relationships...and conduct research that is transformative” (Creswell 2007, p.26; also Olesen 2008). This was especially important to me as I hoped to work closely with the girls in my study in a way that minimizes the power dynamic between researchers and their participants. This framework informed not only the questions that I asked the girls, but also in the way that I *listened* to what they were telling me. Another characteristic of feminist qualitative research is that it acknowledges that the researcher can never be “objective” in the research process. Creswell (2007) states that it is no longer “acceptable to be the omniscient, distanced, qualitative writer” (p. 178). He further argues that, “how we write is a reflection of our own interpretation based on the cultural, social, gender, class, and personal politics that we bring to research” (p. 179).

Acknowledging this perspective, it is important for me to position myself within this study as a White, immigrant woman from a working-class family. So while privileged on some levels in my personal life (I am privileged by my racial identity, but also because I am pursuing higher education), in relation to this study, I am privileged because of my age in relation to my participants. As much as I attempted to make the girls in my study feel comfortable, or tried to position myself as one of the “girls”, the power imbalance needs to be acknowledged. In her work with girls, Zaslow (2009) argues that

“Power is always imbalanced in an interview situation but especially when the interviewer is an adult and the participant is a child or an adolescent” (p. 49).

Thus, as a “researcher”, I realize that I have power to ask the questions, the power to look, examine, interpret and make conclusions about what I see and hear during the interview process (Banks, 2007, p. 42). As McRobbie (2000) has pointed out, “No research strategy is carried out in a vacuum. The very questions we ask are always informed by the historical moment we inhabit...” (p. 121). It is therefore necessary to acknowledge that the questions framing this research, as well as my motivation for pursuing this as a research topic stems from my own personal experiences and engagements with media, popular culture as well as some form of media production when I was a girl. My own understanding, negotiation of and resistance to “what it means to be a girl” took many shapes and forms growing up, and these experiences inform my current interests in the limits and possibilities of girls’ resistance in a society that offers limited opportunities for resistance that can inspire and enable social change.

## **Data Collection**

Data sources for this study include:

- Transcriptions from 19 semi-structured interviews
- (approximately 14 hours in total)
- Interview notes I took both during and after interviews
- Media texts produced by the participants

### ***Interview Data***

In order to maintain fluid interactions during the interviews with participants, semi-structured interviews are the primary data source in this thesis. All interviews took place between September 2011 and February 2012. All but two of the 19 interviews were conducted one on one. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes to an hour. Seven of the interviews were conducted in food courts at shopping malls, six were conducted in coffee shops near the participant’s homes, five were conducted at schools, and one interview was conducted at a park near the participant’s home. Over the course

of six months, I met with six of the participants three times, one of the participants twice, and the other only once. This was due primarily to the participant's time limitations.

The first sets of interviews were informal, and covered topics about school life, friends, and family (see Appendix D for the interview guide). The second interviews were more structured and focused on questions about the media and popular culture as well as the "girl power" discourse and feminism. During the second interview, I also brought popular teen magazines such as *Seventeen*, *Cosmo girl!* and a popular women's fashion magazine, *In Style*. As easily accessible (and widely read texts) these magazines were meant to provoke conversations about the representation of girls in magazines and in the media as well as to have the participants engage in a textual analysis of the magazines. I also asked the participants questions about girls' representations in these magazines, and these conversations usually transitioned very well to my questions about girl power and feminism (see Appendix D for the interview guide). In the third (or final) interview, the participants and I had a chance to discuss the film they produced, as well as revisit any interesting or confusing comments made in previous interviews. The last interview also gave the participants a chance to ask any final questions in person regarding the project.

As all of the participants gave their consent, all but one of the interviews was recorded and later transcribed by me. All of the participants were sent copies of their transcribed interviews, and were encouraged to ask any questions or list any concerns regarding the project. I also invited the participants to make any changes they deemed necessary to the transcripts. Only one participant requested minor changes to be made to her transcript. I also encouraged all of the participants to ask any questions before the start of each interview, as well as after the interview was finished and informed the participants throughout the interview process that they could at any point request certain information not to be used in the final write-up of the thesis.

### ***Interview Notes***

I recorded my own impressions of the interviews once they were completed. This data helped me to remember information that a voice recorder could not capture such as

my own observations and impressions during and after interviews. These notes also guided me in developing questions for subsequent interviews with my participants.

### ***Media Texts***

In total, three short films and one PowerPoint were created by the participants. One film was created individually, and two films were created in pairs. The PowerPoint was created individually. Two participants did not complete a video as part of this project. All of the participants uploaded their films to their YouTube accounts and emailed me the link to their films. The participant who created the PowerPoint emailed me the attachment and I later printed the PowerPoint and brought it with me to my final interview with the participant. Unfortunately, due to technical difficulty, two of the films were not viewed with the participants during the final interview. One of the films was edited and completed in my presence and therefore once it was completed, the participants and I had a chance to discuss it.

## **Data Analysis**

### ***Interview Data***

Due to the large volume of data I collected, I conducted four rounds of data analysis. In the first round of analysis, I transcribed all of the interviews, and then re-listened to the interviews to ensure that all of the information was accurate. In some cases, due to background noise during the interviews, I listened to the interviews 2-3 additional times in order to ensure that the transcriptions accurately portrayed what was said during the interview. Once the interviews were transcribed, I gave myself a couple of weeks before I revisited them. I did this because I felt like time away from the transcripts would give me a fresh perspective upon coming back to them. This was indeed the case; while reading the transcripts, I felt like I had different understanding of what the participants had said during the interview. This approach allowed me to better see what was happening in my data, and helped me when it came to asking follow-up questions with the participant. It also allowed me to reframe some of my questions that might not have been great at generating responses, and to reflect on the kinds of questions I was asking during the interviews. For example, after I read the first couple of



transcribed interviews, I noticed that I was not asking enough open-ended questions. Realizing this, I made changes to how I asked and worded the questions so that they would generate lengthier and more thoughtful responses from the participants. At this time I also made a note of documenting themes that were emerging from the interview data.

Once all of the interviews had been completed and the interviews transcribed, I began my second round of analysis. After reading my transcripts again, I began coding the data by identifying certain emergent themes. For example: style, friendships, family, etc. I made note of these themes along the margins of the transcripts, and highlighted key narratives in each theme. After coding all of the interviews in this way, I identified themes that were dominant across all of the interviews. For instance, many of the participants talked about style and popularity. Seeing this, I made notes regarding the similar and different ways the girls talked about these things. I also made a note about things that stood out in the data—things that were surprising or unexpected. For example, three of the girls told me about being bullied in schools. So while this data did not reflect all of the girls' experiences, I felt that it was important to include in my findings and analysis because these experiences shaped the way the girls positioned themselves in their school and in their relationships with others.

Once this round of analysis was done, I took the dominant themes that I coded, and re-coded them again, this time looking for specific details about each code. For example, "style" became recoded as: *style/as fitting in*, *style/as resistance*, etc. After my initial two rounds of data analysis, I made a first draft of my findings. However, upon receiving feedback on my first draft, I realized that I had not organized my findings in relation to my research question: how do girls understand, negotiate and resist what it means to be a girl. Therefore my fourth round of analysis consisted of me revisiting my data once again. This time I specifically asked myself how my coded themes helped me answer my research question. For example, I asked myself, "*how do girls understand what it means to be a girl?*" "*how do these themes (style, pressure to look a certain way, etc.) help to answer girls' understanding of girlhood?*" I asked myself similar questions for how girls negotiate and resist dominant representations of girlhood, and began inserting these themes under the categories "understand", "negotiate" and "resist". In order to ensure that these themes 'fit' within these categories, I re-read my coded

themes several more times in order to ensure that they helped to answer my research question, and that they represented (in the best way possible) the participants experiences, values and beliefs.

### ***Media Texts***

I analyzed the three films and the PowerPoint in a similar way to my interviews. For example, as I watched the films, I coded them using the same codes I used for my interview data. I also looked for the participants' use of imagery and language in the films, and in particular, how these things together aided in telling their story about "what it means to be a girl". I was also interested in what the participants did not include in their films, and how their films diverged (or not) from what was discussed in the interviews. I took this into account when I analyzed the films.

### **Validity**

There were two steps that I took to ensure the validity of my findings. Firstly, all of the transcribed interviews were sent to the participants so they could make changes or comment on anything that was said during the interview. At this time, I also invited the participants to indicate if they wanted any of the information to be omitted in the study. Secondly, because I interviewed all but one of the participants 2-3 times, I was able to re-visit prior interviews in order to clarify things that may have been confusing. This allowed me to check with my participants that my interpretations of previous interviews were accurate. I also used this opportunity to ask further questions about things that I may have overlooked during previous interviews. This allowed for a deeper understanding of some of the issues the participants talked about.

**Table 1. Participant Profiles**

Name	Age <sup>10</sup>	Lives In	Identifies as... <sup>11</sup>
Louanne	17	Burnaby	Russian/Canadian
Lola	17	Surrey	Iranian/Canadian
Alice	16	Surrey	East Asian
Penelope	15	Burnaby	Indian/Canadian
Alisha	16	Burnaby	Muslim/Indian/Canadian
Lauren	17	Vancouver	Canadian
Lizzie	17	Vancouver	Canadian
Heidi	16	Surrey	Canadian

<sup>10</sup> Age at start of project.

<sup>11</sup> In the first interview, I asked the participants how they would identify their racial/ethnic backgrounds.

## Chapter 4.

### **“We can wear any shirt that we want”: Understanding what it means to be a girl**

This chapter examines findings related to the first aspect of my research question: *How do girls understand what it means to be a girl?* For instance, if they were to tell someone what it means to live right now as a girl, what would they say? How would they describe their experiences as girls? Although my findings indicate that girls have complex and often contradictory understandings of what it means to be a girl, most of the girls in this study also had shared elements in their understanding of girlhood. In this chapter, I have organized my research findings into the following four themes that emerged as a response to this question:

- being a girl means feeling pressured to look a certain way
- being a girl means “being yourself”
- being a girl means that you have a lot of choices
- being a girl means that feminism and “girl power” are not needed

### **“I don’t look that way”: Being a girl means looking a certain way**

Lyn Mikel Brown (2003) has suggested, “As girls move through childhood, the messages about what it means to be an acceptable girl come from everywhere, as do pressures to conform to an ideal beauty image” (p. 26). In turn, all the participants in this study expressed a strong awareness of the societal pressures that dictated what an “acceptable” girl should be. In turn, they understood the kind of girl they were supposed to be in order to be accepted by others in society.

For example, some of the girls spoke about the pressure to adhere to a particular (thin) body type. During our conversation about how teen magazines made girls feel,

Lizzie remarks: “I’m not that perfect. So I kind of feel like, “gee, I wish I was like that, maybe I should do the exercises”. And although Lizzie believes that magazines are “trying to look like they’re putting out a positive image” she often questions which image she fits in with:

They’ll [magazines] have “what’s the right pair of jeans for your body shape” and then they’ll have “petite, curvy, pear shaped” and they’ll have four different shapes”...which one am I? I don’t even know [laughs]. So it’s like they’re kinda trying to [put out a positive image] but I don’t know if they’re doing a great job. I mean, all the models are skinny, all the people...all the pictures of girls are skinny girls.

Lauren, who recalls feeling “fat” when she was younger (even though she was not), tells me:

...I don’t feel like *ashamed* of myself, but I don’t... it’s not really uplifting to see girls who are 90 pounds or whatever, and who are like... perfect skin, perfect teeth. Um, I wouldn’t say it puts me *down*, it’s just not very uplifting. And they’re all like with boys and stuff, I don’t know.

When I asked Louanne whether she ever had any issues with her body image, she quickly exclaimed:

Oh yea, all the time! Probably...I still do, like.... I don’t wanna walk down in a bikini or whatever, like I don’t feel comfortable or whatever.

These narratives illustrate how deeply girls have internalized the dominant (and harmful) representations of acceptable girlhood. However, what is also interesting is the girls’ belief that feeling insecure with one’s body is *natural*. For instance, Lauren told me that being unhappy with one’s body was “common for everyone”, and Louanne suggested that “no girls like everything about themselves”. This was interesting because by implying that *all* girls experience body dissatisfaction, they normalize their own desire to want to look like the thin models they see in magazines. In doing so, they unwillingly erase media’s powerful influence in dictating how girls should look, and reproduce the neoliberal idea that suggests girls’ success as *girls* is independent from social and cultural forces (Harris, 2004). In other words, it is a girl’s *choice* as to how she responds to the media.

One scene in Lizzie and Lauren’s film, *I don’t buy it!* illustrates this point. The scene shows Lizzie sitting at the kitchen counter calmly flipping through the newspaper. In the foreground, the text displayed reads: “I can choose how I respond to media” (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** “I Can Choose How I Respond To Media”

*Note:* Screen capture from Laura and Lizzie’s film, *I don’t buy it* (2012). Used with permission.

While it is important not to undermine girls’ agency in how they respond to media messages, it is also important to acknowledge the power of the media in shaping girls’ perceptions of themselves. So while both Lauren and Lizzie had both expressed feeling badly about their bodies at some point in their lives, their film reproduced the neoliberal discourse of *choice*. As much of the literature illustrates, this is a powerful discourse that many girls often rely on (see Zaslow, 2009; Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz; Raby and Pomerantz, 2011).

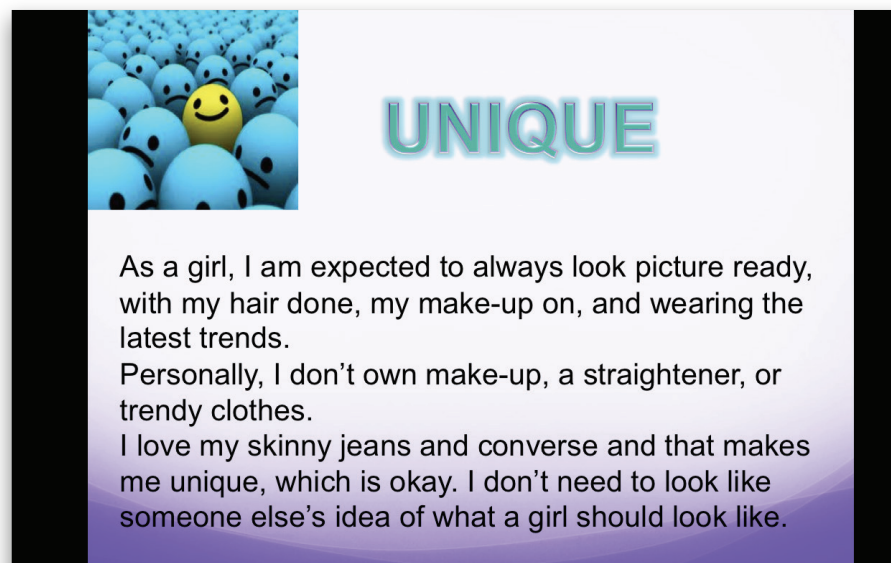
At the same time however, girls often moved away from this discourse and critiqued the *societal* expectations regarding what girls should look like. For example, Louanne (who earlier said that “no girls likes everything about themselves”) observed:

society expects a certain—like girls to look a certain way, to look pretty or feminine or something. And like, you know, like... most people wear makeup because it makes you look better, you have to wear your hair a

certain way, it can't just be a mop on your head. And um, like, in order to get accepted by society you have to dress and talk a certain way.

So even though Louanne implied that it was *normal* for girls to feel negative about their bodies, here she also suggested that the ideal girl is shaped and constructed by "society". As she observes, in order to "look a certain way", girls have to be *conscious* of their identity constructions, by paying attention to their makeup, hair, dress and behaviour. This observation is important because it highlights Louanne's awareness of the socially constructed nature of girlhood. Girls' insecurities with their bodies can therefore not be natural. Girls are not born feeling bad about themselves; their insecurities are created as Louanne suggests by society that asks girls to adhere to a specific (feminine) kind of girl.

However, similar to Lauren and Lizzie's film, Louanne's PowerPoint *Girlhood* also draws on the neoliberal discourse of choice regarding how girls respond to media representations (and expectations) of girls (Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** *Being a girl is being "unique"*

*Note:* Capture image from Louanne's PowerPoint, *Girlhood* (2012). Used with permission.

Echoing Lauren and Lizzie's message of, "I can choose how I respond to media", Louanne chooses not to purchase certain things (like makeup, trendy clothes, etc.) in

order to look like the kind of girl media expects her to. What is apparent from these conversations is that even though girls often acknowledge the unrealistic (and ridiculous) standards to which they are supposed to conform, they are unable to articulate their frustrations outside of the neoliberal discourse of choice.

Like Louanne, Lola also acknowledged societal pressures that dictate what girls should look like. In particular, Lola critiqued the media for creating her desire to look a certain way. During our analysis of teen magazines such as Seventeen and Teen Vogue, Lola suggested that the media:

want young girls to focus on this kind of stuff. Like that's why they're such a bestseller. Vogue and stuff...so many girls and women buy it 'cause, kinda looking through it... young girls look through it and wish "Oh my god, I wish I looked like her", "wow she has really nice legs" ... and it's kind of feeding what I want to look like, it's like feeding my desire to *want* to look this way, but I can't *do* anything about it, like, I don't look that way".

When I asked her why she thought this was such a dominant message in magazines, she said:

I think they wanna distract us—from like... because we're so oppressed, like more oppressed than say a man, the males, they kinda wanna...like I think they wanna distract us from, like, being able to move on, past that stereotype instead of actually focusing on other things, other than just this. Like I don't think it's wrong to focus on these things, like sometimes for any gender this could be interesting, like fashion, some people work in the industry...they like it actually. Like women—it kind of consumes their lives, it's all we have to focus on really...they don't encourage us to like be doing something else...other than the outside. How to look and stuff.

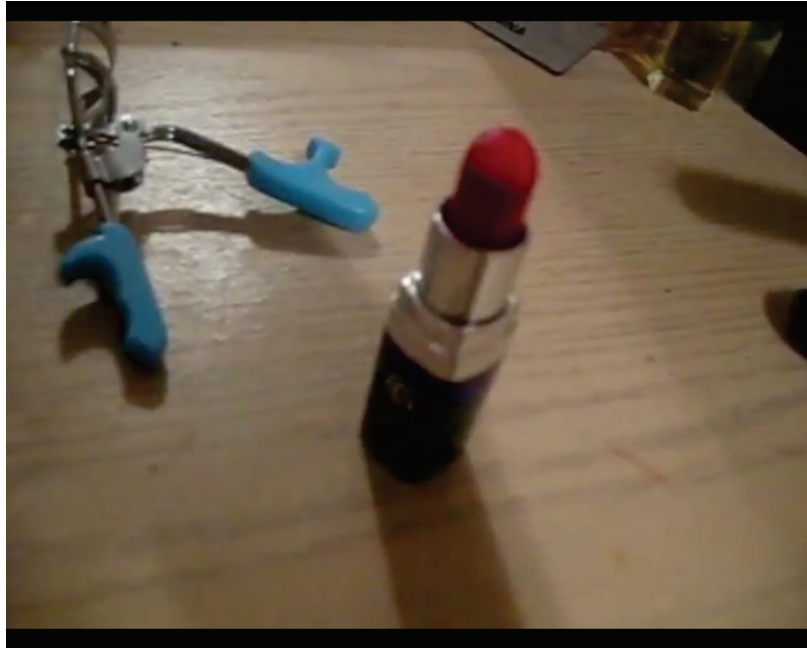
Lola also told me later that girls are expected to "look clean, hairless...kinda like a baby—like a little girl, even though we're like... grown and older". This was an important observation because it evokes important conversations among girlhood and cultural studies scholars regarding the sexualization of childhood, namely girls (see Olfman, 2008; Durham, 2008). As Gigi Durham argues (2008) "ideal female sexuality is youthful, or even childlike" (p. 119). Thus, Lola's articulation of this problematic representation of girls illustrates her understanding of the contradictory ways girls are expected to position themselves in order to gain acceptance in society. On one hand, by



wearing makeup, girls are expected to look older. On the other, they are expected to look younger, like little girls, by looking “clean” and “hairless”. These restricting, and contradictory discourses are something that Lola explored in her film *I am a girl*.

The film begins with Lola doing her hair in the bathroom. As the camera moves away from her face and to a variety of cosmetics on the counter (Figure 5), we hear Nina (who is narrating her film) say:

As a girl I am encouraged to look and dress a certain way, think a certain way, and do certain jobs a certain way. I have so much more potential than these narrow pathways given and encouraged me to follow yet this is what I receive in *my* world.



**Figure 5.** *Being a girl means looking and dressing a certain way*

*Note:* Screen capture from Lola’s film, *I am a girl* (2011). Used with permission.

Because Lola did not see *her* world as an inviting place for girls, she created her own space online where she could express herself on her own terms. Through her blog, Lola could “experiment and try new things” as well as document “the positive things about my daily life because sometimes I forget about those things and focus on the

negative” (email correspondence). At the same time however, Lola acknowledged that even in an online space, she felt restricted in terms of how much of herself she was able to express:

I do wish to actually do some kind of reflection on my daily life and so on but sometimes I feel like I have so many barriers in the way of actually doing that. Like depending on how personal I get on my blog, people could take that information. And in my videos, I always find it hard to form words in a constructive communicative way (email correspondence).

This brings up an interesting question then, of when and where (if ever) girls feel free from societal pressures? Online spaces have been of interest to scholars, especially in terms of how they provide spaces for girls to experiment with their identities (Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009). For example, in their examination of “Online girls”<sup>12</sup> Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz (2009) illustrate that although girls’ online engagements gave them more freedom of expression, (than at school for example), online spaces were heavily gendered, and thus policed by others in the online community (p. 156). Lola’s comment however brings up another interesting point regarding how much girls are policing *themselves* when it comes to expressing themselves through creative forms like blogging or films. How much did these girls *police* themselves in the creation of their films for this study? This is something I will return to in my concluding chapter, when I discuss the future implications and limitations of this study.

Class was also an important element in the girls’ discussion of looking a certain way. For example, both Lola and Alice (who were interviewed together) critiqued the outrageous prices of items in magazines that boast the latest “deals”. As Alice remarked, “It’s not a deal if you’re still paying \$200”. Lola agreed, stating that:

It [magazine] was like, “oh you can get this, these pair of shorts for like 80 bucks”, I’m like, “what!? I can buy a pair of shorts for like 15 dollars”, like

<sup>12</sup> By “Online girls”, they are referring to girls who participate in online role-playing games, surfing the web, instant messaging, etc.

it's like stores you've never heard of...it seems like a totally different place, like it's like you have to live in New York to be glam.

On a similar note, while looking at a magazine I brought with me to the interview, Louanne observed:

like these kinds of ads, like "uptown chic", like what is uptown chic? I live in like Burnaby. Like... "funky prep"...like I'm pretty sure that funky and prep are two different things. How are you supposed to combine them, I don't understand, it just doesn't make sense to me [laughs]. "World traveler" [reading in magazine]...If I'm going to travel the world, I'm not gonna wear like bright earrings, I'm gonna wear a backpack and some very comfortable shoes, you know? And like, I can't afford *half* this stuff anyways.

Louanne also remarked "I'm seventeen, but I look nothing *like* this person. I can't afford shoes like that, I don't wear that, I can't dress like that". Later, I asked her:

**Paulina:** Do you find some of this information useful? Sometimes they [magazines] have like, "what's trendy now, what's not trendy—

**Louanne:** No because I...would not *dress* like that. I'm just saying. And also like that I can't afford anyway.

As Louanne's comments suggest, looking like the ideal girl comes with a hefty price tag. In order to obtain a "funky prep" or an "uptown chic" style, one had to be of a certain class, and this class position would play an important part in determining who gets access to looking a particular way, and who does not.

For Alisha and Penelope, who both shared South Asian backgrounds, the ideal girl signified Whiteness. For example when I asked Penelope if she sees girls who look like her in magazines, Penelope remarked:

Yea, they are mostly White, I just realized that [laughs]...like I mean you'll still find like the random African-American or something, but like, I mean...yea, it doesn't really bother me personally 'cause...I guess, they are mostly, like...girls who do go into modeling are most White I guess. I don't know. Um... yea, it doesn't really make an effect on me, yea.

I asked Alisha a similar question during my interview with her:

**Paulina:** Do you see a lot of diversity? [in magazines]

**Alisha:** No [laughs]. No, not really.

**Paulina:** Does that bother you?

**Alisha:** ... yea it does, but I'm seeing it a little more, I guess you could say? It does—it does bother me when you see the typical—especially in... like the Guess ads, the models are always...Caucasian...and blonde [laughs], and things like that, but I mean, you do see sometimes like an Indian model or celebrity...But I think that for the majority, now that I'm looking at it...all of them have nice hair...the straight hair thing and the lighter skin thing. I mean, even like being *brown*, being a *lighter* brown is always the...the pretty thing.

I return to the issue of straight hair in Chapter 6, however what was interesting to me was that the word “racism” was never uttered by either of these girls. Despite the blatant examples of racism they described, they seemed to be accepting of the fact that White girls were the dominant faces in magazines. Alisha even told me that because now magazines incorporate cosmetics advertisements that have “the dark skin, medium skin, light skin”, she liked the magazines more:

I thought that was really cool 'cause I would actually take from that, instead of having makeup that was like White, and didn't work for me. Um, so then I started to notice things like that, and I said, “Ok cool, that's cool, they made some subtle changes here and there”. That did make me like the magazine more.

The girls' willingness to accept the “random” representation of diversity as well as the “subtle” accommodations of difference, suggests that they have internalized the institutional racism (see Jiwani, 2006) that is so prevalent in society. I also wondered if my presence, as a White female researcher, had anything to do with the fact that they did not speak of racism in their lives, or in the media more generally. Yasmin Jiwani (2006) has pointed out that one's willingness to talk about and name racism during an interview setting depends on who is asking the questions. In her study of young women and girls of colour, Jiwani noted that because all of the women doing the interviews were also young women of colour, the “girls and young women who were interviewed did not hesitate in naming racism as the predominant forms of violence they experience in their daily lives” (p. 77). It is thus highly likely that Penelope and Alisha did not wish to voice their experiences with racism with me, and this is something I will address in my concluding chapter. However, what is evident is that for many girls in this study, looking

the way media dictates was not always an option, nor a possibility due to their different class and race positions.

### **“Like, be yourself”: Being a girl means being yourself!**

For many of the girls in the study, just “being yourself” was seen to be the essence of being a girl. Even though they understood that “being a girl” meant looking and behaving in a particularly-defined way, they still placed a high value on just “being yourself”. This contradictory discourse, which is in line with previous scholarship in girlhood studies, (for example: Currie et al., 2009, 2007) was employed by several of the girls in both their interviews as well as their films. For example, Penelope and Alisha told me that the main message of their film, *What it means to be a girl* was: “being a girl means being ourselves”. In their film, Penelope and Alisha juxtaposed supposedly contradictory images such as stiletto heels with basketball shoes, in order to show that being a girl meant showing all the “layers” of girlhood such as wearing sexy and also sporty clothes. As Alisha explains:

Like be *yourself*, like if you like to wear black... wear black, whatever makes you feel good and whatever makes you feel like you can accomplish what you want to do in that day ‘cause that to me is *power*.

Lola’s film *I am a Girl* included a deep critique of some of the pressures girls feel in order to gain acceptance by society. As I mentioned in the previous section, unlike the other two films produced for this project, Lola raised critical points about girls’ limited opportunities in a world that dictates both how they should look, and who they should become. However, during our final interview when I asked her about the underlying message in her film, she told me it was “just be yourself”. This response surprised me because I thought she would elaborate on how and why she felt girls today were still faced with “narrow pathways”. By claiming that her film was about being yourself, Lola, like Penelope and Alisha were drawing on the “future girl” discourse that Anita Harris describes (2004). According to Harris, future girls are “flexible, individualized, resilient, self-driven, and self-made” (p. 16). As a result, girls are expected to be “confident, resilient and empowered” (ibid), and their success (or failure) is constructed as an individual “choice”. For the girls in this study, “being yourself” can be seen as evoking

this “future girl” because even though they admitted to feeling societal pressures to look a certain way, the only way to overcome these pressures was to “be yourself”. In this way, the burden of these pressures is put on the individual girl, rather than on the patriarchal (sexist and racist) society that creates them in the first place.

This point is exemplified by Louanne, who also repeatedly emphasized the importance of “being yourself”. Questioning why some girls do what others tell them to do, Louanne argued that girls should “be [their] own person, and then [they’ll] be happy”. She states later that although she is not afraid of being herself, being judged by others is common. She says: “I’m not afraid to be myself... but I know that by being myself I will be judged by other people. And like, that’s something I wish would go away”. At one point, I asked Louanne “how can girls love themselves when the world doesn’t love you for who you are?” She replied:

Yea, it’s hard, but like...I feel like...people are attracted to confidence. So if you have confidence, people will be attracted to you. If you’re constantly worried about what other people think, they’re probably just thinking why you’re freaking out, and if you exude confidence, they’ll be like, “that girl knows what she’s talking about, she knows what she wants to do with her life, I wanna be her friend because she’ll probably go somewhere.

This statement goes hand in hand with the message of her PowerPoint presentation which was, “love yourself, and don’t worry about what other people think”. For Louanne, as well as for other girls in the study, confidence was directly linked to being yourself. The girls’ articulation of this discourse is interesting because it illustrates their internalization of this popular narrative in popular teen magazines.

Having confidence as a girl also meant wearing things that not everyone else wears. As some of the girls suggested, girls who followed trends too closely had low self-esteem, and thus were not truly being themselves. For example, in our discussion of style at school, Penelope says that she would rather follow her own style than follow the style of others. She explains it this way:

I would rather be different than follow what they’re doing, ‘cause, sure I’ll wear it if I actually *like* the shirt, but I wouldn’t wear it just because they’re wearing it. That’s sort of bordering on not having enough self-esteem.

As Penelope's comment illustrates, having your own style was seen as more desirable than following others because as she suggests, this implies having low self-esteem.

Due to the power of this discourse, it is perhaps not surprising that many of the girls rejected popular teen magazines, which many of them viewed as dictating "how to look a certain way". As Alice tells me in our discussion of teen magazines, girls who "buy into" the messages in magazines have low self-esteem and are more insecure than girls who do not:

**Alice:** I think it's [magazine] geared towards insecure girls, a lot of it...because, um, a lot of it has to do with beauty, and so these insecure girls will buy it and be like, "oh I could do this and look like Dakota Fanning", you know?

**Paulina:** So you think that girls that don't have low self-esteem for example wouldn't buy into that?

**Alice:** I'm sure they would...but I think the girls who are insecure buy into that more...because they *need* that.

Interestingly, many of the girls were quick to point out that they themselves did *not* buy into magazines, or follow any fashion trends. With the exception of Alisha, who identified as a "magazine junkie", most of the girls told me that they strived to be different in the way they dressed, or at least admired people who dressed how they wanted.

Referring to Lola's unique style, Alice explained that:

it's a breath of fresh air, you know?... and I think it's a lot healthier too because, like...I see these girls wearing what they want and I'm like OK, you know they're like comfortable in their skin, you know they do what they wanna do it's—I'm *proud* of that... I feel good when I see people wearing what they wanna wear.

For Heidi, "being different" also came up several times throughout our interview. She suggested that some people at her school are "all the same kind of...in ways, and they're not being themselves. Like they always have to be like somebody that is in the crowd or whatever". A self described "oddball", Heidi told me she set herself apart from others at her school by cutting up magazines and making collages out of the pictures as well as "taking scissors to a lot of things...to mess up [her] clothes". As she explained to me, "Being different is always a good thing". So although for many of the girls, "being

yourself” meant having the confidence to be who you want, it also often meant dressing in a way that set them apart from others, because it meant they were more “authentic”. Currie et al. (2009) also found that the girls in their study evoked the discourse of “authenticity” “to dismiss the emphasized femininity performed by Popular girls” (p. 172). Moreover, they argue that this discourse of “authentic Selfhood” “signalled possible awareness on the part of girls about femininity as a socially constructed—hence malleable—identity” (Ibid). This is an important point, and one that I will expand on in Chapters 5 and 6 when I discuss how girls *negotiate* and *resist* style and popularity.

### **“I think I can do whatever I want”: Being a girl means having a lot of choices**

For many of the girls in the study, being a girl meant that you had the freedom and “choice” to *do* what you want and *be* what you want. Louanne, who planned on becoming a police officer, told me for instance, “I think that I can do whatever I want, whatever field I wanna go into like, if I’m really interested, I’ll pursue it.” For Lola, who tells me that she does not want to get married or have children in the future, scholarly pursuits are most important to her. After she gets her Bachelors degree, Lola says:

...and then, I was thinking of taking just like advertising or something, and just like doing a job, and then doing my job and then get my masters and then see what other jobs arise from it and then, do my... PhD.

These girls’ articulation of choice regarding their future career is what Pomerantz and Raby (2011) refer to as the “smart girl” discourse. Influenced by the discourse of “girl power”, the “smart girl” discourse suggests that girls can be whomever they want. At the same time, it draws on the neo-liberal discourse that prizes individual effort above all else. Smart girls in this discourse, they argue, are living proof that “girls today are unimpeded by structural constraints, particularly gender inequality” (Pomerantz & Raby, 2011, p.550). Many of the participants however acknowledged feminism for creating these pathways for girls and women in society. For instance, Lauren suggested that girls today have many options for who they want to be as a result of the feminist movement:



I think there's a lot of options for girls, more than there is for guys, 'cause like...there's like a huge feminist movement, so like women could have whatever type of career that they want, they can stay at home, they can work, but for guys there's more pressure to be the breadwinner or be better at—excel at sports. There's more of a spectrum for girls.

Louanne also argues that “feminists do...did some good for us. We have our rights, and we don't have to like...obey our husbands because of feminists”. On a similar note, Lizzie suggests that “we definitely do have, I would say the same opportunities as men, unless you wanna become a priest, you're kinda screwed there”. Alisha, suggests that “so far there haven't been any roads blocked in terms of my gender,” and Heidi evokes feminism when she says:

100 years ago or whatever the women were all, kind of I guess stereotyped as the same... you know just kind of stayed at home and took care of the kids. Now there's—there's people that are...uh... a lot different, and unique and the world has grown a lot because of that.

So for many of these girls, being a successful girl meant that they had the choice to pursue further education, have a career, stay at home, or even skip marriage and children altogether. However, they contrasted their choice (and freedom) to do these things to girls in Saudi Arabia and in Muslim countries whom they believed did not have the same choices. In fact, some of the girls spoke directly about how being a girl was “easy” in Canada compared to being a girl in other parts of the world. As Louanne pointed out quite matter of factly about feminists: “In Muslim countries, they need them there”. By suggesting that girls and women in “Muslim” countries *need* feminists, Louanne is implying that girls and women in *those* countries are oppressed, unlike girls and women in Canada.

When I asked Penelope whether it was hard being a girl, she replied: “I'm doing this project now on Saudi Arabia, like women's rights there. It's crazy what they go through...I think here in Canada yea, it's much easier”. Lauren also suggested that feminism is needed in Saudi Arabia where “women can't even drive and stuff”. For Lauren, this constituted a real concern, whereas in North America, she felt that girls only had to worry about media's influence on girls. In a similar way, Alice and Lola (who were

interviewed together) discussed what they believed to be “real issues” regarding girls.

Alice said:

I have more respect for things that “Because I’m a Girl”, like I like that better than this kind of stuff. Because *that* isn’t talking about the Western hemisphere, it’s talking about *real* issues. Like many girls aren’t getting an education...like it doesn’t matter what shoes you wear, it matters if you get an education.

Agreeing with Alice, Lola added:

in so many countries, so many developing countries, if you have your period, you’re like shunned for the amount of time you—like I know parts of Africa, I don’t know exactly what countries, you know like, they’re in a hut for a week, for weeks, they can’t leave, nobody looks at them.

It is interesting that these girls felt that the “important” issues regarding girls and women existed so far away, even in places they have never been to. As Alice suggested, being a girl is easy because “it’s not like I’ve been out and I’ve seen the world... where girls are viewed differently. I haven’t been there, I haven’t seen that...but I have heard of cases where it is harder to be a girl.” The girls’ preoccupation with girls in the non-West was interesting, especially since many of the girls talked about important issues they deal with every day as girls, such as feeling pressured to look and act a certain way. These girls are drawing on what Marshall and Sensoy (2010; see also Marshall and Sensoy, 2009) call the “missionary girl power” discourse. In this discourse:

non-Western girls are cast as the most vulnerable citizens, as untapped ‘natural resources’ ready to be harnessed and dispatched for their own society’s good...The discourse of paternalistic care is recycled to appeal to Western notions of girl power—to appeal to the adult Western women and other ‘feminists’ to do the right thing by contributing their charity to help the non-Western girl (p. 301).

Furthermore, they suggest that “the Western woman’s and/or girl’s agency relies on the oppression of her ‘sisters’ in the East” (Ibid). As Weems (2009) suggests, Third World girls are often used as a rhetorical device to make a point about Western women, whether in popular, or academic feminist discourse. Consequently, for the girls in the study, having the “choices” to do what they wanted was only seen in relation to “Third

world girls”, whom they saw as bounded by a traditional patriarchal culture that did not allow for the same freedoms as girls in the West.

The girls in the study however were cognizant of the limitations of their choices. Even though they often expressed the fact they have many “choices” to do what they want and be who they want, some of them questioned whether their “choices” were in fact their own. For example, Lola wonders if the way she dresses is her own choice, or influenced by others. She says:

I wear dresses a lot...like that could be because dresses are like more presentable or just 'cause I like dresses. Like sometimes I can't tell the difference because I'm like I don't know, it could be that I'm just seeing it that way, is everyone telling me to see it that way or because I actually like it myself.

Alisha who tells me that only “a small handful” of girls do not actually care about fashion, explains it this way:

I would say subconsciously, a lot of girls don't even realize it, it just goes to their head. “What are these people gonna think...um, you know, “what I saw in the magazine”. It's all running through their head, and I'm totally guilty for that. Like when I'm getting dressed in the morning, yes, I can wear what I wanna wear, but it's not *really* what I wanna wear. It's not like—if I could go to school in sweatpants again, and do that, then I would...um...without anybody saying anything. But subconsciously in my head, I'm just kinda like—always pick out jeans, or I always pick out leggings. I never go to the sweatpants and that's because I guess I feel that maybe it has to do with the compliments, maybe it has to do with...what people are gonna think...because what goes through my head is “what's this person gonna think”, I'll have a specific person in my head, and it happens all the time.

Similarly Penelope, who tells me that wearing makeup is “part of the high school experience”, reveals that although she does not wear a lot of makeup, she feels “a little bit better” with makeup on. Telling me that she feels “naked” without makeup, she later clarifies by saying: “Maybe not like naked but just like, you just feel like abnormal...um, I think you just wanna look better for yourself sometimes.” She also explains that when wearing makeup, “I don't have to be like, hiding in my seat, and like, not showing my face to anyone.” So although Penelope claims to wear makeup in order to “look good for [herself]”, her apparent embarrassment in showing her “naked” face suggests that girls

experience (although not always articulate) their limited choices. As Lola put it succinctly:

I can do whatever pleases me, but at the same time I feel like—like it's a choice, but it might not be much of a choice...and like girls can like have the choice, like "Ok, I don't have to be insecure about this", but like really it's hard to not be insecure when you're in a world where everyone's telling you you have to be insecure, you have to not like the way you dress.

Alice who was interviewed with Lola adds, "Yea, it's like they give you a choice but like, "Ok here's a choice but do this and we're gonna profit from it". So... you really have no choice but to be this kind of girl".

Lola also questioned whether women had the same opportunities and choices as men to pursue non-traditional careers. As she observes:

I noticed that women are not encouraged to go into firefighting, and you don't see a lot of women firefighters, like you don't see a lot of women *trying out* for that...women aren't even raised to think that's one of our options to do that. More physical, hands on, engineering too, 'cause there aren't a lot of engineering students that are female, like it's mostly men.

It is interesting that while these girls were at times heavily invested in promoting the neoliberal discourse of choice, they were also able to step outside of this discourse in order to critique its limitations. While this finding would fall in line with the literature that speaks to the complex and contradictory ways that girls position themselves, girls' critique of the neoliberal discourse of choice is something I did not find in the literature I reviewed.<sup>13</sup> This is important because by recognizing that many of their choices were in fact *not* their own, many of the girls were able to form a stronger critique of some of the

<sup>13</sup> Emilie Zaslow (2009) for example suggests that for the girls in her study, the "neoliberal discourse of girl power [was] deeply imbedded in their belief in choice" (p. 122). And while several of the girls in her study *were* cognizant of the contradictory messages about women in the media (such as you can be a mother and a professional easily), they had a difficult time stepping outside of the discourse.

inequalities girls and women face in society, and thus move away from the neoliberal discourse of choice. Their problematic envisioning of girls in the “third world” however, remained unquestioned.



**Figure 6.** “Being a girl means it’s my right to choose”

*Note:* Screen capture from Penelope and Alisha’s film, *What it means to be a girl* (2011). Used with permission.



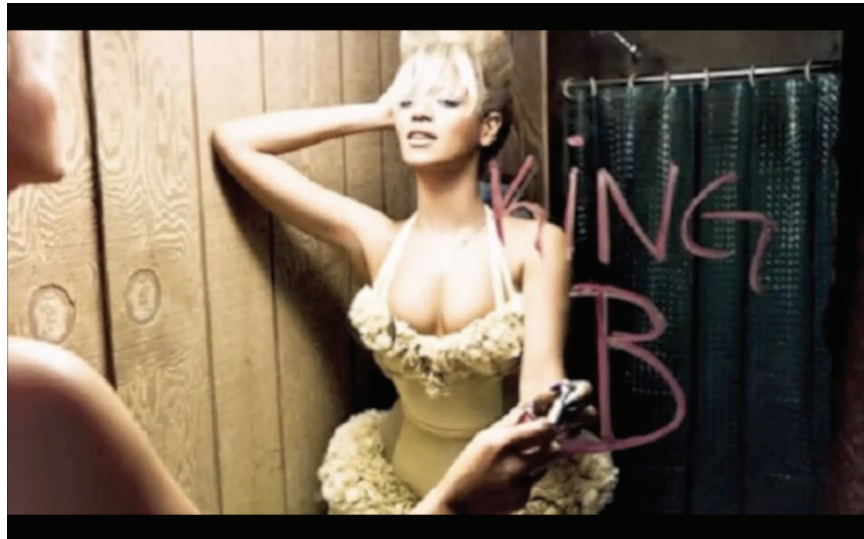
**Figure 7.** “Being a girl means that I can be stubborn”

*Note:* Screen capture from Penelope and Alisha’s film, *What it means to be a girl* (2011). Used with permission.



**Figure 8.** “Being a girl means that I can be the high school quarterback”

*Note:* Screen capture from Penelope and Alisha’s film, *What it means to be a girl* (2011). Used with permission.



**Figure 9.** “Being a girl means that I can be king”

*Note:* Screen capture from Penelope and Alisha’s film, *What it means to be a girl* (2011). Used with permission.

## **“You can stop now. It’s over”: Being a girl means we don’t need feminism**

Consistent with much of the literature regarding girls’ and young women’s relationship to feminism, many of the girls in this study expressed the idea that feminism was no longer necessary. For example, Budgeon’s study (1998) with young British girls highlighted that while feminism was often mentioned in their discussions of gender equality, feminism was not seen as a “place [young women] can occupy” (p. 128). Similarly, more recent studies with girls (for example: Pomerantz & Raby; Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009) illustrate girls’ postfeminist stance on feminism wherein girls believe that feminism is no longer necessary and that we live in an equal, post-feminist society.

Louanne for example argued, “that was a long time ago, they [feminists] did their job, good job, you can stop now. It’s over”. This is similar to what Lizzie said about feminism: “it’s not so much of an issue, but it is still an issue”. Here Lizzie was suggesting that although there is equality between women and men, feminists continue to bring up issues such as “women having equal opportunities and all that stuff”. This “widely accepted view that gender equality has been achieved” (Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009, p.174), also led many of the girls to believe that feminists were “radical” women who “analyze everything” and take things “too far”. For example, Alice suggested that feminism is about “standing up for the women who are able to be firefighters and want to be firefighters and should have a chance to be firefighters”. At the same time however, she argued that sometimes feminists:

take it too far, in movies and stuff. Like they talk about, sometimes there’s movies about guys. And they’re like, “why is there a movie about a guys, why not a girl”? It’s like... it can get to the extreme.

Louanne echoes Alice’s idea by suggesting that feminists are “a bunch of chicks that want everything that guys have”. She explains further:

if [feminists] had the power they would grow themselves some penises too. Ok, have fun with that. Have your penis, that’s fine, whatever, but like, then what do guys have, nothing. Then there’s gonna be some kind of... male version of feminists, and there’s gonna be like a third world war. And it’s just like, you know, *let* girls have power for themselves, and let them do things for themselves. But let guys... just *leave* them alone,

they didn't do anything to you, leave them alone. Don't go crazy. Don't go nuts in front of like an NBA game and say "Let a girl in there". It's a *male* sport, we have the WNBA, but you know, don't try to force your way into the NBA.

In a similar vein, Lizzie expressed the idea that equality between men and woman is impossible because "we're fundamentally different, right?" She explains further: "No matter how much you want like the man to be the family man, and the woman to have a full time job or whatever, sort of like, it's programmed into your body".

For Lauren, who says she sometimes doesn't "agree with the whole women's movement", feminists often "play the victim":

I feel like sometimes feminists, not all, but like they play the victim, like "the media did this to us", like "we are the victim, we are sexualized". It's kinda us doing it to ourselves in a way, so I don't like that whole thing about being a victim.

Later during our conversation, Lauren explained:

**Lauren:** We're like the ones posing for these [magazines]. No one is doing this to us, it's women.

**Paulina:** But do you think the reason why they're doing this stuff is because that's the only way to be successful?

**Lauren:** Um, but there's lots of women who are successful who aren't like that.

**Paulina:** Like young women?

**Lauren:** I can't think of any...that's interesting, I can't think of any women who are famous who do not sing or act, or...I can't think of anyone [laughs]. That's pretty sad.

This was an interesting point in our conversation because Lauren came to realize the limited opportunities young women have in the media and popular culture yet she struggled to articulate why this could be the case. In a culture that blames women for their own objectification, it is not uncommon for girls and women to use the language of patriarchy. However what is also interesting is that once questioned, girls are quick to realize the double-standards women still face.



Some of the girls even suggested that women were to blame for the way they were treated in society. For example, in her discussion of popular television shows, Lizzie explains:

we expect to be treated the same as men, but then, we also expect the door to be held open for us. And to be... drooled at because we're so sexy. So it's kind of a double standard and I think it's really not—helpful for uh, women to do that... to go on shows like that...to create shows like that.

In trying to understand why some girls dress provocatively, Alice argues:

I don't think it's necessarily the girl's fault, or the magazine's fault, but it's just...it also has to do with the way you carry yourself. Like if you wear something like that, and you're walking around... just flaunting yourself, then of course somebody's gonna be interested. Or disgusted. It all depends on the guy.

Interestingly, Alice states that although she does not think it is the “girl's fault”, she goes on to explain how by wearing something provocative, girls are in essence, responsible for the interest they receive, presumably by men. For these girls then, equal treatment is impossible if girls and women continually “flaunt” their sexiness. Ironically however, claiming a feminist identity was an undesirable identity for most of the girls. According to Lauren, claiming a feminist identity at school might make people think you are a “lesbian”. As she explains, identifying as a feminist:

has a bad reputation for girls. I don't think girls wanna be known as a feminist. I think that makes it feel like you're like lesbian, and stereotypes about feminists don't care about how they look... and that... it's like a turn off for guys.

Where did girls learn to associate these stereotypes with feminism? Most of the girls told me that feminism was not a subject they learned about in great detail at school, and as Alice remarked regarding the chapter in her history textbook about feminism, “I'm sure we're not gonna learn about it for long”. What is important is that these popularized discourses about feminism determined how girls could and could not identify. Heavily invested in rejecting feminism, the girls denounced the possibility of a feminist identity. This is significant because although many of the girls claimed to have many “choices” in

terms of who and what they could be, they were still very aware of the fine line between doing what you *want*, and being called “radical” or a “lesbian” for identifying with feminism. Lola also suggested that feminists are not entirely being themselves because they are trying to look in a way that is unnatural, or “manly” as she puts it:

like a know a lot of radical feminists, like if you even look at the way they dress, they don't dress like in dresses or skirts or wear makeup, and I think that's fine if that's really what they want...but I know that a lot of them are just doing that because... it seems more manly but like women and men, they are different in a lot of parts, like biologically...

Therefore the girls' negative association with feminism could stem from what Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz (2009) describe as the “rules governing the behaviour of anyone identifying as “feminist”” (p. 174). For my participant Lola, these “rules” meant dressing in a way that was inauthentic (or unnatural), while for other participants, it meant “taking things too far” by being overly critical or by wanting “everything that guys have”. In this way, Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz suggest that “feminism becomes associated with conformity and the pursuit of authentic individualism with “resistance” (Ibid). However, the girls' overall rejection of feminism does not signal a lack of feminist consciousness. As Currie et al. point out, de facto feminism, or “feminism as praxis” (p. 130):

embraces the practices of women who do not explicitly identify as feminists but whose everyday actions create greater freedom for women generally. It emphasizes that becoming a feminist is a much more complex and ongoing process than typically acknowledged: one is not positioned simply either “inside” or “outside” feminism by taking up a Subject position in feminist discourse (p. 131 see also Currie, Kelly and Pomerantz, 2007).

Thus, while many of the girls in this study did not claim a feminist subject position, many of them did in fact question and resist gender inequality in their lives. This is similar to what Zaslow (2009) found in her ethnographic study with young girls. Even though the majority of the girls in her study were aware of inequality based on their gender, they did not use the term “oppression” to describe their situation, nor were they eager to claim a “feminist” identity. As Zaslow argues, this is due to the fact that young girls today do not relate to feminism as a “movement”, because feminism today is seen

as an individual, rather than a social endeavor (p. 135). So while girls often resist ideas about gender inequality through the articulation of their own negative experiences, the neo-liberal discourse of “girl power” prevents them from thinking beyond individual choice and empowerment.

### **“It doesn’t really have an effect on me”: Being a girl means we don’t need girl power**

For many of the girls in this study, understanding what it means to be a girl was often talked about in relation to what being a girl was *not*. Not being a feminist was an important subject position taken on by many of the girls, even though feminism was acknowledged as having opened up many opportunities for women and girls. Using the language of postfeminism, many of the girls suggested that equality and power were things that they *already* had, and therefore did not need feminism *and* girl power, which many of them interestingly believed to be the same thing. For instance, when I asked Louanne, “what do you think about the idea of girl power”, she replied: “Girl power. Like, feminists? I don’t know”. Later she says:

I’m totally down for like girl power. Like feminists that do stuff, that are like crazy it’s like...”Ok, you’re going over the line, like let the guys have their little fun” don’t try to butt in, we have our stuff too, right? Like some feminists are crazy [laughs]. But I’m totally like down for like equal rights, and yea, we’re just as strong as the male species is...we can do stuff for our own, and like, we know how to take care of ourselves and everyone... Like, I made it this far without your help I can keep going, like I don’t need you to guide me anywhere.

My discussion with Penelope also illustrates this challenge to define and come to terms with “girl power” and feminism:

**Paulina:** What do you think of [girl power], what kinda comes to mind?

**Penelope:** Um, I think it’s cool I guess...I don’t know, I just don’t really see what they’re doing...like...girl power for me like, I wouldn’t even be able to explain it probably um...it doesn’t really affect how I think of myself or how...I don’t think it really affects a lot of girls and how they feel...about themselves. Um, but I’m not really, I’ve never

been like a feminist or anything, so I don't really have that, it doesn't really have an affect on me...

**Paulina:** What do you think the message is?

**Penelope:** ... oh girls don't have to depend on anyone or um...guys aren't better than girls. Or guys aren't stronger than girls. I think it's sort of trying to abolish all those stereotypes that we have I guess or whatever.

**Paulina:** Mmmhmmm... girls can be what they want.

Penelope: Yea.

**Paulina:** so why wouldn't you identify with that, wouldn't you agree with those things?

**Penelope:** Yes, I agree with it, but I don't—it doesn't really...like I get the message but it's like I don't feel like I was...was doing anything that would like, I don't think that I would actually need it. Like I don't think I'm, was already like, "Oh I need a boyfriend, or "Oh I can't do this because I'm a girl". So I guess it doesn't really have an effect on me.

Lauren also sees girl power as redundant because, as she explains, "I've never felt like I needed to take back the power, and that kind of stuff, 'cause I never felt like it was taken away from me". The girls' confusion over the term "girl power" is understandable, given that there is no single definition of girl power. However, what is interesting is that by equating girl power with feminism, girl power becomes viewed as something that only *certain* girls need rather than an expression of "choice", which is one of the underlying ideas of girl power. And, even though many girls adopted the *language* that comes with the package of girl power (choice, confidence, a "can-do" attitude), most of the girls did not associate with the term. For the girls in this study, having the choices to do what they want were all taken as a given, and therefore "girl power" was viewed as unnecessary, and so was feminism. Ironically, the girls' rejection of "girl power" is very much in line with the discourse of girl power which suggests that girls are "self-assured, living lives lightly inflected but by no means driven by feminism, influenced by the philosophy of DIY, and assuming they can have (or at least buy) it all" (Harris, 2004, p.17). In other words, girls do not *need* girl power to tell them they can "have it all"; they already believe this to be true.

Some girls like Lola and Alice recognized the limitations of the girl power discourse, and saw it as a consumption driven discourse rather than an "empowering" one. For example, Lola stated:

I don't like it. I can understand maybe for some people how it's like empowering, but I don't feel like it's very honest. I feel like it's just touching the...cover topics, kinda like the cover of a page.

Later she says:

like if I saw girl power in here [pointing at a teen magazine], I would question it, 'cause I'd be like, "this is a fashion magazine" and it's talking about girl power.

When I probed Lola and Alice further by suggesting, "but now we can do whatever we want, right?" Alice retorts, "we can wear any shirt that we want". These views reflect a common feminist critique of the discourse of girl power. As Aapola, Gonick & Harris (2005) suggest, this discourse, which replaced the original meaning intended by the Riot Grrrl movement, has been critiqued for its "crass commercialism and commodification of girl power [which] voided it of any feminist content it might have once had" (p. 30, see also: Gonick, 2006a). Lola and Alice's critique of girl power is important because it illustrates their understanding of the commodity feminism that is prevalent in media culture and also maybe suggests that they are nearing a feminist consciousness.

Two of the girls in the study however, embraced girl power because it allowed them to "play" with their identities as girls. For Alisha, having girl power enabled her to adopt a more masculine style such as wearing men's shoes. Describing herself as "masculine" and "tomboyish", Alisha tells me that girl power is:

awesome, and yea I do that too, the reason I dress more *masculine* is because I can do that. I can dress like that. Because it makes *me* feel more powerful and confident. If I'm doing something and I need to be confident and kind of more of an extrovert than usual, then I wear my favourite pair of sneakers ... and do that... and I would use that... to kind of ... *towards* my girl power.

Ironically, by dressing more "masculine" Alisha feels more empowered as a girl. Louanne, who also at one point says, "girl power, yea, be the man", identifies as a tomboy. As she explains, "I'm not a girl...like a stereotypical girl, I hate makeup, I don't own a skirt, I'm very much of a tomboy". Thus, in stark contrast to the popularized

notions of “girl power”, which often include lots of glitter and pink, these girls alternatively viewed being a tomboy as “girl power”. Because girl power allowed these girls to express themselves in a less traditional way, it gave them more options for who they could be as girls. At the same time, Louanne and Alisha’s interpretation of girl power could be the same reason for the other girls’ rejection of it. As Aapola, Gonick & Harris (2005) suggest, girl power “may be encountering something of a backlash” (p. 39). This backlash, they suggest is due to the depiction of these newly “empowered” girls as “real bitches”, “a bad influence” and “little cows” (quoting Reay, 2001, p. 160).

Thus, the girls’ engagements with the discourse of girl power are complex to say the least, but deserving of attention. What is evident from these conversations is that the discourse of girl power, while empowering for some, is no longer a useful way of conceptualizing “what it means to be a girl”. Although deeply invested in this discourse through their language, the girls in this study rejected girl power because of its commonsensical approach to girlhood.

## **Summary**

In this chapter, I have shared data from my findings that answer how girls understand what it means to be a girl. As my findings reveal, the girls in my study had complex and often contradictory understandings of girlhood. On the one hand, they understood that to be an acceptable girl in society, they had to look (and behave) a certain way. At the same time, these societal pressures seemed to get erased every time they evoked the neoliberal girl power discourse of choice. In turn, feminism did not play a big role in their lives, because many of the girls expressed the idea that feminism had already “done its job”. This is consistent with much of the literature that examines girls relationships to feminism (Budgeon, 1998). However, as my study illustrates, there was also an overwhelming consensus among my participants regarding the usefulness of feminism exclusively in Muslim and “third world” countries. So while the girls’ dismissal of feminism is in line with some of the literature, girls’ beliefs about feminism as something that is needed in other parts of the world was not something that came up in the literature, especially not with girls in the same age group as the ones in my study.

Another idea that is given less attention in the literature but came up repeatedly in my study is the girls' perceived redundancy of the term *girl power*. As I have shown, most of the girls viewed girl power and feminism as the same thing, and thus viewed girl power as something they no longer needed. Despite their reliance on the discourse, many of the girls were unable to articulate the difference between these two discourses.

In the following chapter, I explore how the girls in this study negotiated what it means to be a girl through their style, and through the negotiation of their friendships at school.

## Chapter 5.

### **“I feel like my high school life is a science experiment”: Negotiating Complex and Contradictory Discourses of Girlhood**

In this chapter, I present and discuss my findings in relation to the question: How do girls *negotiate* what it means to be a girl? I have organized my research findings into the following two themes that emerged as a response to this question:

- negotiating girlhood through style
- negotiating girlhood through popularity

#### **Negotiating Girlhood Through Style**

“I could be the stiletto heels or I could be like basketball shoes”—Alisha,  
16

One way that the girls in this study negotiated what it means to be a girl was through their experimentation (and regulation) of their style. More specifically, through style, girls experimented with their identity constructions in ways that made them stand out from their peers, and in turn, positioned them as independent and unique individuals. As Pomerantz (2006) has argued:

style is a shifting and malleable text that enables girls to find each other, to form (dis)identifications, and to distinguish themselves from others. Girls use style to signal “who” they are within groups and as individuals, and how they want to be seen within the social world of the school (p. 175).

Many of the girls in this study often expressed the notion that certain clothes were acceptable to wear to school, while some were unacceptable (also Raby, 2010).



These “commonsense” understandings were interesting because they illustrated how deeply ingrained school rules (in terms of dress code) have become for girls’ own understanding of appropriate expressions through style. For instance, when I asked Penelope whether students in her school (which did not have a uniform) were free to wear what they wanted, she told me:

well, I mean obviously you can’t wear shirts that have inappropriate language or whatever, but like, um... I mean, I think it’s not... it’s not... not a lot of people wear like combat boots with like the whole Emo thing going on, and I think people stay away from that just because... like, not a lot of people do it, it’s like, out of the ordinary.

Viewing an Emo<sup>14</sup> style as “out of the ordinary”, Penelope suggests that it would be inappropriate or “uncool” for someone to dress in this way. Thus, Penelope is aware of the implicit rules governing one’s style—if a lot of people do not do it, it is not seen as desirable. It could be argued then that girls’ awareness of the “rules” governing one’s style also limits them from exploring and expressing their identities to the fullest extent.

Unlike Penelope, Heidi often chose to challenge the rules. She told me she liked to “take scissors to a lot of things” and “mess up [her] clothes”. She also boldly stated: “I don’t really care what I wear or what other people think of what I wear”. It was interesting then, when she told me that sometimes she wore more “modern clothes” because “sometimes you have to look normal”. Clearly, Heidi understands the limitations of expressing her own style, as she was able to identify when something cut up was deemed inappropriate to wear. Thus, Heidi’s negotiation of her style allowed her to experiment with a part of her identity in certain contexts (such as when she is with her friends), but not in others (such as when she goes to school).

A similar issue arose in an interview with Lola and Alice. For example, when Alice told me that she does not care what people think about what she wears “most of the time” to school, I question what she says by suggesting:

<sup>14</sup> Emo, or short for “emotional rock”, is a genre of rock music. Body piercings, dark dyed hair, short skirts and boots for girls are generally considered to be a part of Emo “style”.

**Paulina:** Yea, but you wouldn't wear like pyjamas.

**Alice:** Oh no. I wouldn't do that.

**Paulina:** Why not?

**Alice:** I don't know because I feel that school isn't a place where you should be relaxing....and... pajamas are for sleeping... so.... I find that you should have more respect for yourself... and for school. 'Cause if you're wearing pajamas it just makes it seem like you don't care about school.

In this example, Alice is also expressing her awareness of the line that exists between being able to wear what you want to school, and not. Also what is evident from Alice's comments is that school rules in terms of dress, are highly internalized by girls. This finding is in line with prior research examining how students negotiate dress codes in schools. In particular, Raby (2010) found that some of girls reproduce the "language of dress codes, which commonly refer to self-respect" (p. 344). In turn, Raby suggests that "schools participate directly in the production of both gendered and sexualized identities" and thus, if girls do not wear clothing deemed "appropriate", it is their own fault for being marginalized by others (Ibid).

This internalizing of the rules can be seen in Lola's comment in response to what Alice said about not wearing pajamas to school. Lola argues that the reason for not being able to wear certain things stems from society's tendency to judge girls for what they wear:

in this world...like you're seen if you take things seriously, you have to dress like you take things seriously. It's not the case here sometimes I feel like, sometimes... like honestly I would wear pajamas to school if I'm tired, I don't really care how I look, and if I'm in school, I should be focusing on *that*. But, at the same time it's just that I don't have to make a big deal about all of it...but I could just take the effort and... wear something *nicer*, and then don't think about what I'm wearing, and just do my work, focus on school. It's like I feel what you put out to the world is what you're gonna get sometimes. Like, if you're gonna wear something... like that shows a lot of cleavage, and a lot of legs, a lot of people will not... like see you as... like maybe you're really really smart, you're really, like really like observant, intuitive and all this stuff, but people aren't gonna see that, 'cause most people have first impressions, and that's not like always fair but that's what they have and like who we *are* right now and it's like how are you gonna be treated. Do you want that kind of treatment when you... wanna do a lot of stuff, maybe you wanna study longer, study this and that and talk to certain people, meet certain

people, you can't always do that if... people perceive you in a certain way.

As Lola's comment illustrates, through "poor" (unsanctioned) style choices, girls will not get the kind of respect they deserve. So on one hand, girls seem to have a plethora of choices regarding their style, and they use style to communicate their unique identities to others. On the other hand, girls have internalized ideas about presenting themselves in a very specific kind of way through their style. Wearing cut up clothes, or clothes that are too revealing communicate two very different things about girls. In one way, not caring how you look implies a lack of respect for the school and the self, and by caring too much by dressing in a revealing way implies that you are not very intelligent. However, it is in *between* these two "extremes" that girls find spaces to negotiate what it means to be a girl. These complex and contradictory expectations for girls made me wonder how they were able to find the balance between "being themselves" and being what society expected of them.

**Paulina:** So where do you girls fit into that? You don't buy into this stuff necessarily 100%, and yet you're not ostracized...how do you find that balance between like, "I'm not gonna try to look like Katie Holmes", but "I'm also not gonna *not* wear makeup and dress in my pajamas...how do you find that balance?

**Alice:** Not being conscious of it...but...you have that confidence, you know, you know what you want but at the same time you don't necessarily look like you're being completely the polar opposite of this [pointing to magazine].

**Lola:** See like for me it's like, I am aware what is like...what is deemed as acceptable and stuff, but I'm not fully like, I try not to focus on being like that. If I happen to like something that is socially, or like, very typically acceptable, I'll do it, it's not an issue for me...

As this exchange shows, negotiating what is acceptable and not in terms of one's style, is strongly internalized by these girls. By "not being conscious of it" these complicated negotiations appear effortless, intuitive and natural.

Unlike Alice, Alisha describes a more *conscious* effort when it came to negotiating her style. For example, Alisha told me about her struggle with her father over her style which he found too "masculine". As she explained:

**Alisha:** when I started to get my own voice I turned more towards...like a very masculine, like hoodies and things like that because it was very comfy. And then...you know...I rebelled, and I said no, like, "why are you trying to change me?"

**Paulina:** when your dad said you should—?

**Alisha:** yea, I was like "no way", I just hate, you know that stuff, and it's not comfy and it's whatever, and then, I think there came a time where I did find when I was looking in the mirror, I was like, "what is this?" And then I just changed to...the things that I liked, that looked good. Like, I love purple so I'd wear a purple top [laughs]...and I would incorporate *me* with the things that did make me look presentable, I would say.

Although Alisha makes it appear as though her change of style simply happened overnight, and without the influence of anyone but herself, her comment illustrates how she consciously negotiated her own style with one that was more "presentable" according to the authority figure her father represents. In this new more "presentable" style, Alisha was able to dress more "masculine" as well as "girly":

I wanna be that girl that can um,...look cool in...like that kind of looks like a gangster, but is very girly at the same time. And can look very, um...with all the pastel colours with the little flower in her hair...

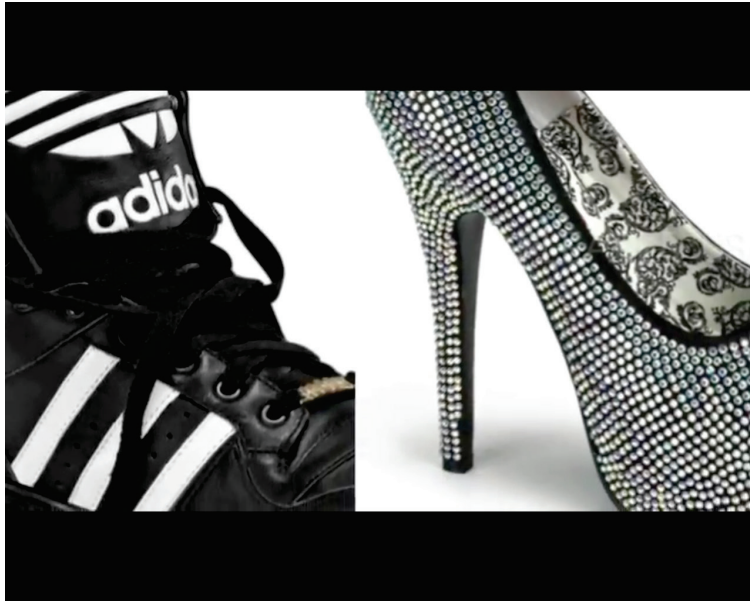
Alisha's refusal to dress in a way that aligned with "proper" (feminine) girlhood may have caused her father alarm. As Gonick (2006a.) suggests, "girl" as a category is often associated with "white, middle-class and heterosexual girls" (p. 122). As a result, to be seen as *outside* of the category girl, or to perform girl in the wrong way signals "gender deviance" and even lesbianism (Carr, 1998, p. 531). By carefully selecting clothing that is in line with traditional girlhood, like pastel colours and flowery hair accessories, Alisha is able to carve out a space for herself that allows her to be more masculine, but also one that absolves any suspicions regarding her sexuality.

Alisha also negotiates her identity through style by wearing things that no one in her school wears. For example, as I discussed in Chapter 4, Alisha liked wearing clothing that was "out" because they were "different" from what everyone wears. She also told me she liked to wear accessories that stood out from everyone else's more "subtle" style:

I wear lots of jewellery...it's like costume jewellery and you know, I like really big shiny rings, and things like that and everyone comments on those things... and no one is like that at school, they're all very subtle...And so when I wear that, I get attention, and they're like "whoa, you're shiny, and you look cool", and you know?

Alisha's careful negotiation around the kinds of things she wears is important because she is able to play with her style in a way that marks her "different" from everyone else, but also because it is "safe" in the sense that her style does not mark her as *too* different. This is especially important for Alisha because as I discussed in Chapter 4, she was bullied for not "fitting in" with the popular girls in elementary school. Thus, because she is fully aware of what *too* different looks like, and what the consequences of being too different are, she negotiates a style that still fits within the parameters of what is considered "acceptable" by her peers at school, the school dress code, as well as by her father. Thus, Alisha's identity is negotiated through a complex and conscious process, one in which she carefully selects what elements of style will mark her as unique and "different" from her peers at school, but at the same time ensure her inclusion among them.

Alisha's investment in her appearance is also significant because as a girl of Colour, she had to work harder to gain acceptance from the popular group she often hung out with. Unlike the other girls in this study, Alisha's darker skin already marked her as different, and she therefore had to work at negotiating a style that was fashionable and thus "acceptable" to the popular group. As she told me, her "skin, body, hair" was different from this group, which was predominantly White. So unlike some of the girls in the study who told me they "did not care" about what other people thought about their style, or about style in general, Alisha did not have the choice *not* to care. For her, not caring meant social exclusion and bullying.



**Figure 10.** “I wear stilettos or Nikes depending on the day”

*Note:* Screen capture from Penelope and Alisha’s film, *What it means to be a girl* (2011). Used with permission.



**Figure 11.** “I’ve only worn a dress four times in my life”

*Note:* Screen capture from Penelope and Alisha’s film, *What it means to be a girl* (2011). Used with permission.

## “It’s a big division”: Negotiating Popularity at School

“They definitely think that they are superior over everybody else” –  
Louanne, 17

A dominant theme that emerged from my findings had to do with the complexities of school life. More specifically, “fitting in” was often cited among the girls as a common goal. Interestingly, some of the girls told me that fitting in with a particular group was important to them, and then (often in the same breath), they would tell me that it was *not*. Just like with girls’ style, it was interesting to see girls negotiated the precarious terrain of popularity within their high schools.

Before I present the findings that show how girls negotiated popularity in their schools, I highlight the girls’ responses in terms of how they viewed their particular schools, as well as their peers. This background will provide a helpful context in which to illustrate how girls negotiated popularity in their schools and in turn, how they positioned themselves as girls.

During the interviews, I was interested to know about the girls’ schools. I was surprised to find that the majority of the girls in this study described their school as well as their peers in negative ways. Lauren for example told me:

**Lauren:** Most of the people are really nice, but it can be pretty snobby...and it’s high school. I don’t like a lot of people in my grade, but I can’t do anything about that.

**Paulina:** By snobby, you mean like cliquy, like some groups don’t want to hang out with other groups?

**Lauren:** I think it’s like really shallow. Like people obsess over like the stupidest things and like all the people can talk about is like...like I don’t know, everyone just seems like... a little bit obsessed with themselves—not everyone, but a lot of people.

Alice, who goes to a different school, tells me her school is “separated”:

I don’t know how to describe it... you can talk to each person individually and they’ll be really nice but as soon as you get with your own friends...it’s a big division.

On a similar note, Heidi told me her school had cliques, and that some of the people in her school were “all the same”:

I guess they're all the same kind of...in ways, they're not being themselves. Like they always have to be like somebody that is in the “in” crowd or whatever...there's a lot of people that, when you know them, when they're just by themselves or when they're in the group of friends, they're a whole lot different.

Similarly, Louanne told me very matter of factly: “...the thing with like high schools, you can't like combine cliques or whatever”. Furthermore, she described the girls in her school as “bitchy”:

...like a good 90% of the girls in my school are really...*bitchy* [laughs]. They're like really, really bitchy [laughs]. And like, um, I like to think of it as...if one like, person in the popular group hates you, then they all hate you because they all collaborate together...

For Lola, the high school environment was very “childish”:

I feel like sometimes it's just...it's very...childish, like the environment's kinda childish...I feel like it's just really *high school*...just your typical high school...like they don't focus on...[pause] like more serious kinda stuff, like it's not as mature...

Later when I ask her to clarify what she means by “mature”, Lola replied:

...just the general atmosphere of it, sometimes it's very...Like if you even observe people sometimes, it's just like...like sometimes there's fights or like a lot of people do drugs, like...we have a lot of people that do drugs in our school for some reason...like from what I've noticed. And I don't know, it's just kinda like a childish attitude for me.

What is interesting about these accounts is just how “natural” a negative school culture is made to seem: Cliques, snobby, immature and “bitchy” students were all seen as a natural part of the high school experience, and were rarely questioned by the girls as to *why* these things were happening.



In the next section, I highlight three girls' experiences with bullying in their respective schools in order to illustrate how, within the context of being bullied, they attempted to carve out unique subject positions for themselves and in turn, how this enabled them to negotiate the terms of popularity in their schools.

## **'Suck it Up': Girls and Bullying**

As presented in Chapter 4, Alisha and Louanne were both bullied because they did not look nor behave like the popular kids. As Alisha told me, she was part of the popular group one day, and then excluded the next. Describing it as a "vicious circle", she said:

I was part of the popular crew...and then I was bullied. One day I was part of it, next day I was dropped...things were thrown at me, said to me...just thinking about it just makes me really, just upset that I actually let myself go through that.

In particular, Alisha told me that this bullying, which was done to her mainly by one of her female school mates, prevented her from going to the high school of her choice:

I didn't go to the high school I was supposed to because of this one girl. And I ended up going to Cedar South.<sup>15</sup> But then after three weeks, I couldn't do it at South, I...because I came from a small elementary school, and personally because I'm not good with change...I just you know, I had to suck it up and go to Riverside...Just to think that grade seven prevented me from going where I wanted to go...it's just like, when I look back on it now, it's like "why did I let that happen? Why did I let her win?"...I can honestly tell you that grade eight was hell. I *hated* grade eight. Um...[laughs]. It was *bad*.

Later, I asked Alisha why she was bullied:

<sup>15</sup> All school names have been changed

**Paulina:** Why were you bullied? You were bullied by the popular group you were with and then one day—

**Alisha:** Yea! It was pretty much, just because...I would do everything to try and fit in with her [girl who bullied her], she would be like really nice, she would be the sweet little girl, and the next day... if she got attention from the guys, then she would kind of think that she was popular and I would let her do that. I mean, yea, I can say it is...somewhat my fault 'cause I let her take advantage of me and I didn't know better.

What is interesting (and heartbreaking) about Alisha's account of being bullied is that she places the blame on herself for being the victim of bullying. She asks herself, "Why did I let that happen?" as if wanting to be a part of a group warranted her bullying. This is problematic because it suggests bullying is something that has to be dealt with on an individual level—as Alisha stated, she had to just "suck it up".

Like Alisha, Louanne was also bullied by a girl at her school:

There's one girl actually that I've known since like kindergarten, but um, then we went to two separate schools in grade four or five or whatever, and then we didn't see each other again till high school. And she *changed* a lot, she became a popular person, and I didn't know who she was anymore. And she didn't like the way that I *didn't* change, I stayed the same kinda. And so she told all her new friends, "oh you don't hang out with that Louanne chick, I don't like her" and they were like, "Oh right, we believe what you say, we're your friends so we're gonna stick on your side", kinda thing?

Rachel Simmons (2002) refers to this kind of behaviour as "relational aggression" (p. 21). Relational aggression is common among girls because they grow up in a culture that "refuses girls access to open conflict, and it forces their aggression into nonphysical, indirect, and covert forms" (p. 3). Similarly, Louanne was indirectly the object of nonphysical, indirect, and covert aggression by her female bully. Yet while she was taunted and shunned by this popular girl and her friends, she was also physically bullied by boys in her school:

Sometimes I'd like walk home, they'd like throw things at me and call me bad names from like across the street and stuff. I just ignored it 'cause I thought "one day I'm gonna be better than you guys, and you guys won't be a part of my life".

Startled by what I was hearing, I asked Louanne:

**Paulina:** Did your teachers ever know about that?

**Louanne:** Um, sometimes I would tell them about like, I never told anybody about the physical... I just took it in stride, said you know what, "I'm a big person I'm gonna be the bigger man and not bully you back", right? But I told them like the verbal abuse, the emotional abuse and like sometimes they would talk to the other girls...the other girls they like, they don't care. They don't care, they're gonna continue doing it so after a while, after nothing changed, I was like "you know what, I'm just gonna take it and I'm not gonna hear what you think of me, I am my own person.

Similar to Alisha's account of bullying, the solution to overcoming it was by dealing with it individually. Once again, girls are drawing on the neoliberal discourse of individuality, which positions them as the caretakers of their own destinies. What is also significant in these examples is the girls' unwillingness to draw attention to the fact that they are being bullied. Heidi, who was also bullied, told me that she "just kind of accepted it as part of life. What goes around comes around". Furthermore, she told me:

I didn't really tell anybody. Not really wanted to, like...talk a whole bunch about myself, so this is kind of a weird thing [referring to the interview], but yea...I never talked to my parents about it...

By talking about being bullied, Heidi suggests that she would be drawing attention to herself, which in her mind was a bad thing. Instead, she kept quiet about being bullied, and "just accepted it".

This problematic scenario is a result of what Simmons (2009) has called "the curse of the good girl." As part of this "good girl" persona, girls often do not speak their minds for fear of hurting other people's feelings. As Simmons describes, these girls go through emotions like, "*I shouldn't feel this. I'm making too big a deal out of it. I shouldn't say this: it will make me a bitch, a drama queen, an outcast*" (p. 6, italics in original). So because the "curse" does not allow girls to speak their minds, they internalize and personalize the issues at hand. However, my findings suggest that at least some of the girls in this study used a "good girl" persona as a way of negotiating the realm of popularity within their schools. In particular, they do this through the discourse of "getting along", which I explain in the next section.

## **“I got along with everyone”: Negotiating Popularity**

One of the ways the girls ensured their inclusion was by adopting the “good girl” persona that allowed them to “get along with everyone”. As my findings reveal, “getting along with everyone” allowed some of the girls to negotiate the terms of popularity by positioning themselves in the centre of their social worlds. Neither “in” nor “out”, some of the girls in the study ensured a secure place for themselves within the school, albeit one that had to be carefully and regularly negotiated. For example, telling me that she “gets along with everyone,” Lola said that she was not part of the popular group at school:

I’ve just never really been involved in that [popularity] ‘cause I...I get along with everyone so I’m not really like...I’m not distinct like...I still have like my major friends, but I get along with everyone usually, but I’m not interested in that [popularity] it’s just not my thing.

Later, Lola tells me that she has two sets of friends at school:

I have like, two sets of friends...one set, um, I don’t know to describe them...Ok, I have one set and I would say they are more immature, crazy, and like, you know...and I have another set and they are more mature, like they are more mature...

What is interesting about Lola’s comments, is that even though she did not view popularity as important and was not “distinct” at her school, “getting along with everyone” allowed her to negotiate two sets of friends at school. In turn, this allowed her to manoeuvre between groups when she felt like it.

Louanne told me that even though the popular girls in her school were “catty” and “bitchy” and that “other girls don’t like them very much” she would still talk to them. She says:

...the popular girls, like if they wanna talk to me, I will open up, and I will talk to them, if they wanna be friends, but um, I don’t usually hang out with those people...my people are like...they’re like...the people that hang out in the art room during lunch.

Louanne's comment is interesting because it shows that she would be willing to overlook the popular girls' "bitchiness" and be friends with them (but only if *they* wanted to). By playing the good girl, Louanne opens up the possibility of friendship with popular girls, but then distinguishes herself from them by saying that her friends are different from these girls. Louanne also brought up class as an indicator of difference between herself and the popular kids at her school. In particular, she tells me that "the really rich kids" who went to a different elementary school than she did, all ended up attending her current high school. She explains further:

They [popular kids] drive like Hummers and Porches at my school, and I drive a crappy little 1994 Subaru [laughs]. Don't park beside me thank you very much. Yea, and so a lot of them have a lot of money and all our presidents since grade eight have been Greenvally<sup>16</sup> kids, 'cause they buy the big posters in front of our school, and they make friends with everyone right before election and stuff.

So in some ways, Louanne wants to remain separate from the popular kids because the closer she gets to them, she can be easily marked by her lower class position. As Louanne jokes, by parking their expensive cars next to her "crappy" Subaru, a distinction is made between who has "a lot of money" and who does not. Louanne's complex negotiation of (a possible) friendship with the popular girls then, needs to also be seen through the lens of class (see: Bettie, 2003), just as much as gender, since both of these identities intersect in her understanding of popularity in her school.

Being "seen" with the popular crowd was also one way in which some of the girls in this study negotiated popularity. For example, although they attended different schools, both Alisha and Alice told me about "the table" at their school. As Alice simply explained, "the table" is "where the popular kids sit". Thus sitting at "the table" marked one as "popular" and cool. Alisha told me that:

if you sit at the table...you...you belong I guess?...I used to be scared to go there, but in grade 10, I was like "dude, it's a *table*, it's a *table*". I

<sup>16</sup> School name has been changed.

walked over there and sat on the table, I'm like "wow, I'm sitting at the table".

However, as both Alisha and Alice told me, *sitting* at the table, while it ensured a space within the popular group, came with a certain set of unspoken rules. In particular, Alisha described how in order to be a part of the table, you had to look and behave in a certain way. For instance, she told me about a conversation that took place at the table between two girls:

Basically the one girl on my, the one I was friends with before, and you know, she's very pretty, she has her little group and I think she's quite up there, or whatever. So her and her friend were talking and...her friend said to her, she was like, "would you still talk to me if I was overweight?" and the girl said, "no do you think I would talk to you?" and other girl said, "yea, 'cause I wouldn't either".

It is important that girls at the table look a certain way; in this case girls had to be thin in order to maintain a seat among the group. Style was another important "rule" of the table. As Alisha told me, she "can't wear anything, like...crappy. Like I can't wear my sweatpants." I wondered why Alisha would want to be friends with this group of kids, but as I soon found out, she did *not* consider them her friends:

**Paulina:** Are you a part of that group normally?

**Alisha:** No. I just sit with them...I'm like, kind of *casual* friends with all of them...I can feel comfortable sitting there. And um, but I'm not friends with them...I don't really have a...*friendship* with them.

It is interesting that while Alisha tells me she is "comfortable" with them, she also says she does not feel comfortable enough to wear her sweatpants at the table. Later in the interview, Alisha told me that even though she does not fit in with them in terms of how she looks, she still wants to be seen with them:

I don't really wanna be in their group. But it's very tempting. You know, you want that sense that you belong...but I would rather sit and not talk to them [laughs].

Alisha also suggested that the conversations among the popular kids at the table were shallow, and that when she is with them, she has to be "two people":

I guess you could say I could be two people. I could be like them, I could talk about things they talk about... *really* shallow stuff like fashion and *guys*, which I'm into—half of me. The other half of me, me and them... don't really connect. And it just like in that sense I can't be *myself* when I'm with them because I'm not showing *all* of me.

On a similar note, Alice also told me how sitting at the table with the popular kids was awkward:

It was really awkward because I wasn't wild like them, I didn't get along with those kinds of people... I just couldn't relate, I didn't find stuff that they were saying interesting. Like it was funny, entertaining definitely, but I don't think it was worthwhile.

There are many interesting things happening here. First, the girls' good girl persona allows them to be "seen" at the table, but not heard. Although they felt like the conversations taking place were shallow, they did not speak up for fear of being mocked. As Alisha told me, she was unable to have conversations about "world issues and politics and stuff" because the people at the table would think, "Oh my god, she knows so *much*". However because the girls understand how the rules of the table "work", they are able to carefully negotiate their own space within it, even though they do not agree with what goes on. More specifically, by being "seen," they negotiate a secure space among the popular kids and thereby gain status in the school. This is especially important for Alisha because she was bullied in the past. At the same time, not being "heard" was also a carefully and consciously negotiated as it once again, ensured that they would not be "found out" for being too intelligent.

Alisha's comment about being "two people" is also significant. Evoking the concept of "double consciousness" (Du Bois, 2006), Alisha sees herself through the eyes of the (predominantly White) popular people and in turn, negotiates an identity for herself that will "fit" in with the dominant group. At the same time, she is fully aware that she is not being true to herself, and that to do so, would mean social exclusion by the popular group. So although many of the girls were adamant about not wanting to be part of the popular group in their schools, they were still active in negotiating the terms of popularity through a good girl persona. Not wanting to be "in", but also not wanting to be

“out”, the girls’ careful negotiation of popularity allowed them to move between one group and the next (although not always fluidly).

## Summary

As this chapter illustrates, one of the ways the girls in my study negotiated what it means to be a girl was through the experimentation and regulation of their style. In particular, girls’ style provided a “space” for the girls’ identity constructions. By expressing themselves through their style, girls were able to position themselves as unique individuals—as individuals who did not follow trends, but were also not completely outside of the domain of what was acceptable for girls to wear.

Another way the girls’ negotiated what it means to be a girl was through their negotiation of popularity. As “ideal girls”, popular girls are often viewed as epitomizing ideal girlhood. And while popularity was not seen as the desired goal by many of the girls in my study, by evoking “the good girl” persona, they were able to maintain a presence among them was one way that they could ensure their acceptance within that group. However, as I have also shown, negotiating popularity had different meanings for different girls. For Louanne, class was an important marker of popularity. Her inability to move freely from one class to the next, might explain her overall rejection and criticism of popular girls in her school. For girls like Alice and Alisha, looking and behaving like the popular girls was important because it signalled their inclusion among the popular group, even though they could not be themselves. These examples are important because they illustrate the complex ways in which the girls in this study negotiated the terrain of popularity at their schools. In particular, these examples demonstrate how class, gender, race and even violence, shape the way girls understand and negotiate popularity, and how they construct their identities, both in relation and in opposition to popularity.



## Chapter 6.

### **“I don’t shop at Sephora or Aritzia”: Resisting Dominant Representations of Girlhood**

In this chapter, I present and discuss my findings in relation to how the girls in my study *resisted* popular representations of girlhood. I also examine how the girls’ understanding and articulation of inequality acted as a form of resistance to hegemonic discourses of girlhood. I have organized my findings along these themes:

- resisting beauty practices and other girls’ style
- resistance through style
- resistance to dating
- articulating inequality as resistance

### **“It’s too much work”: Resisting Beauty Practices and Other Girls’ Style**

#### ***Resisting Beauty Practices***

As discussed in Chapter 4, many of the participants understood that being a girl means dealing with pressure to look and behave a certain way. In this section, I highlight my findings that illustrate how the girls in this study resisted particular beauty practices that are often associated with girlhood.

As many of the girls pointed out, to be an acceptable girl, one had to look a way that was consistent with the images they saw in popular teen magazines and on television. As Heidi pointed out, these representations always show “the same kind of person with like, the same attractiveness.” One of the ways girls resisted dominant representations of girlhood was through their resistance to beauty practices such as applying makeup and doing their hair. For example, many of the girls stated that

applying makeup was too time consuming. As Lizzie explained, “It’s too much work.” Alisha, who also told me: “it takes a lot of work” to look a certain way, recalls putting in a lot of effort into her appearance:

When I was starting to get into that kid of *girly* mode it was very, like comfort was the last thing...last year I was always in my contact lenses and always just trying to do that thing on like, the eyeliner, like I’m one to cake on makeup...yea I just did that to maybe... I don’t know, it *did* make me feel good, but yea, I did spend that extra time in the morning, which I could have used sleeping in. And now I use it to sleep [laughs].

As Alisha points out, these beauty practices were things she invested in when she started dressing “girly.” These girls’ comments are interesting because they suggest their awareness of the socially constructed nature of girlhood. They understand that being a “girl” means participating in certain rituals that are time-consuming, and even painful.

Lauren also told me that not only did she not “have time in the morning” to put on makeup but also that she did not know how to apply makeup. She stated: “I don’t know how to put it on, I don’t have any makeup, I’m sure I could if I really wanted to but...I just don’t want to”.

Louanne, who compared her morning routine with that of her friends, also illustrates that looking a particular way takes time and effort. She tells me:

I *know* girls that wake up at 5:30 in the morning. I wake up at 7:30, that’s too early for me, but *they* wake up at 5:30 so they can straighten their hair and do... like makeup for twenty minutes, like choose between outfit, A, B, or C...I wore makeup today, took me *two* minutes to do both eyes, then I put some eyeliner and I was done. And like, my hair, I didn’t brush this morning, I literally got out of bed, brushed my teeth, washed my face, and got out of the house. And like...I know girls, oh my goodness... my friends will be like, “Ok guys, meet in two hours” and it’s like 3 hours later, and I’m like “guys what are you doing?” “Straightening my hair”.

So although Louanne *does* wear makeup, she makes it very clear that she does not invest as much time into her appearance as some of her friends. Louanne’s mention of straight hair also came up in other interviews. More specifically, many of the girls spoke about the prevalence of “straight hair” among the popular girls at school.

Penelope, who has had “super curly hair” her entire life, tells me that she refuses to put in the extra time to straighten her hair:

I refuse to straighten it ‘cause it takes like two hours, and I’m like, I’m not putting that much effort into my hair” [laughs].

Alisha, who also has long curly hair, told me that she does not straighten her hair because her “hand hurts when [she] straightens it for that long!”, and tells me “ I just try to like my curls”. Telling me that “Everyone at [her] school wants straight hair”, Alisha keeps her hair curly even though one of the popular girls likes to play with and straighten other girls’ hair:

She plays with the hair, like the people beside her...she just goes like that, just runs her hand through their hair and um, ‘cause I have curly hair, she used to do that and it would...like, “what are you doing, can you not”—I don’t like people touching my hair, I’m really OCD about that, I don’t know why, but it just like—it just like bothered me, and I’m like “ok stop” and then, she would um, tell me “straighten your hair more, straighten your hair more, it’s easier for me to do that”, and I’m like “no” [laughs]. So I kept it curly but all of her friends have straight hair and extensions.

Alisha’s refusal to straighten her hair is significant because she resists the control the popular girl has over her and other girls. As she states, playing with someone’s hair is “kinda like a symbol...she’s playing with their hair, and she’s kinda like their leader, you know, she has all of them on strings”. And so even though Alisha tells me she does not entirely fit in with this popular group in terms of her “skin, body,...hair” she keeps her hair curly, which is an important part of her identity. Alisha’s resistance to allowing another girl playing with her hair is also important because it illustrates her resistance to being Othered by this particular (White) girl who had a fascination with playing with her curly hair. Jiwani (2006), in describing an instance where an Afro-Caribbean Canadian girl describes her experience with having her hair touched by White people, argues:

That Black hair should be considered ‘strange’ reflects one facet of the ethnocentric white gaze, but that one’s space can be so violated demonstrates a power relation whereby those who are crossing this space in order to assuage their curiosity feel no sense of transgression because they simply take for granted the inferiority of the person whose hair they are touching (p. 80).

This powerful observation is important in illustrating the various layers of marginalization girls of Colour experience, but not always name. For Alisha, as well as Penelope, having straight hair meant that they could, at least temporarily, suspend other (White) girls' curiosity about their curly hair. Evidently, curiosity about someone's hair suggests that it is not the norm, that it is different, and "exotic". Therefore, if *curly* (dark) hair is not the norm, straight hair is, and so as one already marked as different due to colour of their skin, straight hair makes it that much easier to fit in with the dominant group. As Alisha tells me, there is only one other girl of Colour in the group she hangs out with, but she too has straight hair: "there's an African girl, but I mean, she's really pretty she has extensions and straight hair". Therefore Alisha's resistance to straighten her hair is symbolic in that she resists looking like the popular girls, and at same time, she resists being objectified and exoticized for her difference by the White girls in her school.

## Resisting "Other" Girls' Style

Since many of the girls in this study resisted certain beauty practices such as applying makeup or straightening their hair, they often heavily critiqued the style of other girls in their schools who *did* appear to invest a lot of time in their appearance or who wore clothes that were more revealing. Louanne for example, told me the "popular" girls at her schools were "bitchy" and "catty" and introduced me to a term used to describe these girls at her school—"LG's" or "little girls". According to Louanne, "LG's" are:

girls that prance around kinda like.... skanks [laughs]. They wear too much makeup on their faces, talk like they're stupid even though we know that they're not but they think that it will impress boys or whatever, and their life revolves around them looking perfect, and being like, the ideal girl.

Louanne was very critical of the popular girls' investment in their appearance as well as of their behaviour. In their study, Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz (2009) argue that "Popular girls embodied the tenets of idealized femininity and, as a consequence, they symbolize a way of doing girlhood that is socially rewarded by (adult) teachers as well as peers" (p. 85). Therefore because popular girls embody an "idealized femininity",

Louanne's critique of the popular girls in her school can also be read as resistance to the dominant representations in the media that seek to create these "ideal girls" in the first place. However, instead of critiquing the role that media or peer pressure plays in influencing how girls dress, her frustration was taken out on the popular girls whom she viewed as buying into the superficial and stereotypical representations of girlhood.

Similarly Alice, who told me she used to wear popular brands like TNA ("Tits and Ass") to fit in, now questions why other girls in her school wear this brand. She remarked:

So I used to...wear TNA all the time...And I see girls and I'm like, "you realize what TNA stands for and you realize that, you know, like, it's not accentuating good parts of you".

So although Alice admits to wearing the TNA brand in order to fit in, she does not account for the social pressure other girls may be experiencing to wear this brand. Instead, she positions these girls as making the wrong choices in regards to how they present themselves to others.

In a similar way, Lola suggests that what other girls wear represents a "different kind of femininity" in which they seek attention from others:

I notice a lot of girls, like if they wear that kind of stuff [more revealing clothing] I usually find that they are seeking a kind of attention, or like...they want something out of that, like they want to feel something out of that or they want other people to feel something about them...not maybe like "oh, I'm like willing" but that kind of attention...I want to be noticed.

In this passage, Lola expresses her concern for girls who wear certain clothes to get attention, subtly marking them as "other" from how she positions herself. Lola's observation is also similar to Louanne's comment about girls in her school who post pictures of themselves on social network sites like Facebook. As Louanne explained it, "camwhoring" is the act of "being a whore on camera!" For example, girls will take photos of themselves for Facebook "staring at themselves...in poses and like not wearing too much clothing." So not only were some of the girls in this study resistant to dressing like the popular girls, they were also critical of and resistant to the behaviour

that apparently came with the package of being *that* girl. Their curiosity as to why some girls would “choose” to wear certain clothes is interesting as well as contradictory, especially since they strongly expressed the idea that girls had “choices” to be who and what they want to be, and that girls should just “be themselves”. In this context, “being yourself” means “being yourself” *within* the boundaries of an acceptable femininity—one that is neither too “skanky,” nor “masculine.”

In her book *Girlfighting*, Lyn Mikel Brown (2003) suggests that “girls’ treatment of other girls is too often a reflection of and a reaction to the way society sees and treats them” (p. 32). She writes:

Girls and women derogate and judge and reject other girls and women for the same reasons they fear being derogated and judged and rejected—for not matching up to feminine ideals of beauty and behavior or for being brave enough to care. Girls’ meanness to other girls is a result of their struggle to make sense of or to reject their secondary status in the world and to find ways to have power and to experience feeling powerful (Ibid).

This is an important point as it explains the girls’ critique of popular girls. As a result, some of the girls in this study who critiqued the style of other girls in their school, failed to make a connection between the way some girls dress and the possible societal and peer influences on them (despite simultaneously acknowledging these pressures in their own lives). Instead, the girls often slipped into a neoliberal discourse of “choice” when describing the style preferences of other girls. This is problematic, because by blaming other girls for their style choices, important issues, such as sexism, classism and racism go ignored (see: Bettie, 2003 & Pomerantz, 2006). Furthermore, the fact that the girls were quick to critique other girls’ style instead of the often problematic/harmful media representations of young girls, suggests not only that they have internalized the language of patriarchy, but also that they lack the language that would enable them to talk about these things in a more critical and constructive way.

Interestingly, these girls’ accounts of the inappropriateness of other girls’ dress are consistent with current literature (for example: Raby, 2010; Pomerantz 2006) on the politics of dress codes in schools. For example, the female participants in Rebecca Raby’s (2010) study heavily criticized other girls’ style for being “whorish, slutty, disgusting, disturbing, and wrong” (p. 345). However as Raby argues, “Othering is...one

strategy (among others) to illustrate one's own social, gender, and fashion competence" (p.346). So in order to know and be able to speak about *themselves*, many of the girls in this study also used the strategy of "othering" girls in order to position themselves as different from the girls they viewed as being too invested in the discourses of femininity.

Gerry Bloustien (2003) found that the girls in her study chose to investigate the lives of other girls in their documentary films instead of themselves. Bloustien recounts:

I realized that the girls saw themselves as investigators of others, not the object of scrutiny themselves. I then began to understand that this was the initial testing out of space and possibilities—to see what was "permissible" in their own eyes and in their own worlds...(p. 52).

However for Bloustien, this was an example of othering and distancing of the *self*. Through the use of two different techniques<sup>17</sup> in their films, Bloustien argues that the girls in her study othered *themselves* as a way to see how others view them. Interestingly, by othering *other* girls as well as themselves, the girls in my study were able to indirectly speak about themselves to me, the researcher. This could be seen as a possible strategy of resistance in an interview setting where the girls were able to tell me about themselves, through the "othering" of other girls as well as themselves.

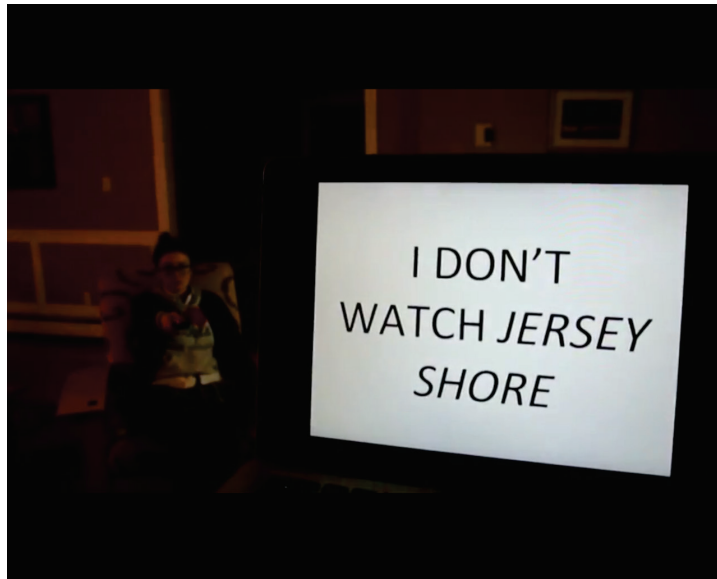
An explicit example of this can be seen in Lizzie and Lauren's film, "*I don't buy it!*" in which they position themselves as girls who are unencumbered by the burdens of "typical" girlhood. Two scenes in particular exemplify this. In one segment of their film, Lizzie is shown in the background watching TV, and the text the viewer sees in the foreground is: "I don't watch *Jersey Shore*." In another segment, Lauren is seen fixing

<sup>17</sup> The girls in Bloustien's study used two techniques in their films (often simultaneously) in order to distance or "other" themselves. In the first, "ask me questions" technique, the girls asked Bloustien to film and ask her questions. As Bloustien suggests "asking questions" "offers license to be personal. So much of our culture, especially for women, emphasizes the inappropriateness of talking about oneself so that a space has to be created in order for one to "objectify" oneself, in order to be the "other"" (p. 53). The second technique ("the fourth wall") allowed girls to "other" themselves by not acknowledging the presence of the camera while filming.

her bicycle in what looks like a garage, and the text “I don’t shop at Sephora or Aritzia” is seen in the foreground. In the first example, the girls are distancing themselves from a popular reality television show that involves a group of young (working-class) adults living indulgent lifestyles in New Jersey. In particular, this show draws on stereotypical portrayals of young people as “party animals” who do nothing but drink and party. The female characters in the show dress in revealing clothing and do not appear to be very intelligent. Thus the girls’ statement “I don’t watch *Jersey Shore*” is not only a rejection of the show itself, but also for these particular messages of youth sexuality and a working class lifestyle.

Their second statement, “I don’t shop at Sephora or Aritzia” is a rejection of two popular chain stores that sell cosmetics, clothing and accessories. Aritzia, with its popular brand TNA, is marketed to a young female, hip and affluent demographic, as most of their items are prohibitively expensive. During their interviews Lizzie and Lauren told me that following trends was not a high priority. For instance, Lauren told me she was “a jeans and t-shirt” girl, and Lizzie told me she liked to shop for more unique items at second hand shops. Also, by telling their viewers they do not shop at Sephora, a popular cosmetics megastore, they reject the notion that girls are obsessed with beauty. As they make clear through other scenes in their film, they are more interested in travel, sports and having fun together as friends instead of beauty and consumption. However after watching their film, one is still left with questions about the girl producers themselves. As their film illustrates, resistance is working in multiple ways—not only are they distancing themselves from “other” (mainstream and popular) girls, but also in this case, the researcher. This has interesting implications for video production work as a form of resistance with youth, and is something I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 7.





**Figure 12.** “I don’t watch Jersey Shore”

*Note:* Screen capture from Lauren and Lizzie’s film *I don’t buy it* (2012). Used with permission.



**Figure 13.** “I don’t shop at Sephora or Aritzia”

*Note:* Screen capture from Lauren and Lizzie’s film *I don’t buy it* (2012). Used with permission.

## “Why is there that boundary?”: Resisting through style

In this section, I look at how two girls in particular used their personal style to transgress the boundaries of acceptable and dominant representations of femininity. For example, Alisha tells me that among her group of friends:

**Alisha:** I’m pretty much the guy [laughs]. I know it seems like really weird...I can be masculine, I can be like you know, I don’t know how to explain it [laughs] but I’m very tomboyish at times...

**Paulina:** What do you mean, about being masculine?

**Alisha:** in terms of the way I dress, I wear a lot of guys’ shoes so literally masculine...but I think it’s my personality, I’m like into sports and...I’m kind of like...very harsh at times in terms of like, you know, I’ll say something to you and it’s very, you know, “boom, boom, boom”. And I’m just—I get along with guys, like a lot, I think a lot quicker than I do with girls. For some reason, I don’t know why.

Alisha’s understanding of the term “masculine” is interesting because not only does she associate it with men’s shoes, but also with being more physically active and direct in her interactions with people. Interestingly then, if these are masculine characteristics according to Alisha, then feminine characteristics would make girls more inactive and passive. Despite this, Alisha later tells me she uses her more masculine style to “[make] a statement” about what is deemed (un) acceptable in her school. She explains:

I feel like...*wearing* [men’s shoes] like in my circle, is making a statement. Because when people comment on it and maybe they look at me when I’m wearing guys’ shoes, like “what is she *doing*?” but it just kinda—it just kinda shows... that I can do that too. Why can’t girls wear sneakers? Why is there that boundary? And why can’t guys wear pink? Why is there that boundary?

As Alisha makes clear, her choice to wear men’s shoes is in direct opposition to what is deemed acceptable attire for girls in her school. In turn, this disrupts the notion that girls must wear “girls” shoes, and boys must wear “boys” shoes.

So while Alisha used her more masculine style to resist what is deemed acceptable for girls to wear, Lola used her more traditional feminine style to resist what many of the girls deemed as a “skanky” style among girls at their school. Getting

inspiration for her clothes from old films and “children’s books”, Lola tells me that she views the way other girls dress as a “different kind of femininity”:

Like I don’t see this in school [her style]. Like I see a different kind of femininity...like a lot of girls wear those, like, tight tank tops and maybe like yoga pants that are really nice and tight or whatever. Or like tucked into their leggings, uGG boots...that’s really feminine too, I just see it as a different kind of feminine.

Lola observed that many of the girls felt held back by not being able to wear the kinds of clothes she wore. As she explained, many girls would compliment her style, but they did not feel like they too could wear clothes like she did. She wonders:

But it’s like why are you coming up to me and—like I understand you complimenting...that’s nice, but like you’re saying you wish you could wear that... like I get that a lot and it’s like “but why can’t *you* wear that?” or like, “what’s holding you back from wearing it?” unless you can’t find it in the store or something, what’s holding you back?

Although Lola attributes girls’ discomfort with wearing clothing that is outside of the mainstream to girls being “sexist towards themselves,” her comment can also be interpreted as a critique of the neoliberal “choice” discourse. It is evident to Lola that although girls supposedly have the choice to wear what they want, they often do not choose to do so, for fear of not looking like everyone else. Furthermore, Lola’s style, while still very feminine, and thus acceptable, is out of reach for certain girls because it is not a style that is regularly represented in the media. Lola argues that girls are:

not allowing themselves [to dress like her] because they feel like they can’t...society doesn’t really want them to...it’s like, it’s like women are doing it to themselves now also but that’s from, the media and like...what society sees a woman as.

So even though society “doesn’t really want them to”, Lola wears clothes that challenge dominant representations of girlhood.

For both Alisha and Lola, style is a space in which they can enact their resistance to dominant representations of girlhood. Although Alisha’s style is still “acceptable” because she mixes feminine clothing with masculine clothing, she uses her style to

challenge gender boundaries that limit girls (as well as boys) from dressing how they want. Similarly, Lola challenges the dominant representations of girlhood (which sees as a “different kind of femininity”) through dressing in a way that is not heavily represented in the media.

## **“People break up in like two weeks”: Resistance to Dating**

Six out of the eight girls in this study were not dating anyone and expressed their indifference towards dating in general. Penelope tells me, “I don’t really care about that right *now*” and questions why there is such a focus on relationships in media and popular culture. Speaking of popular teen magazines, she asks “it’s weird to see it like all the time, like are they saying that everyone should be in a relationship?”

Many of the girls suggested that dating in high school was trivial and thus did not take it seriously. As Penelope stated, “you’re in high school, you’re not even half way through your life,” and then explained that “People break up after like two weeks”. Alisha goes a step further and describes relationships as dysfunctional in high school and that “from the moment a guy gets into your pants he’s gone, you have to see that”. Fearing what may happen, Alisha is not persuaded by magazines’ focus on relationships. She says:

I think even if I see it [relationships/advice] in magazines, I just look at it as... I guess you could say as entertainment... I don’t take it too seriously, I don’t let it influence me, because I already made up my mind. And those people can’t influence me ‘cause I see what they say about each other, I see what happens.

Referring to girls who get hurt in relationships with boys, or by other girls who spread rumours about girls for getting involved with boys, Alisha resists dating, declaring that she is not ready. What is also interesting to point out is that even though Alisha views the information in magazines about dating as “just entertainment”, she does rely on magazines for information on style and fashion. This picking and choosing of magazine content is interesting because it suggests that even though girls may resist some aspects of hegemonic girlhood (dating/boys), they might not necessarily resist other aspects that dictate how one should look, etc.

Lola, who has dated in the past, says that previous relationships with boys did not last long because she did not find them mentally stimulating. Furthermore, her distaste for dating stems from observing how other girls interact with boys. Lola says:

I've noticed a lot of girls aren't themselves with guys, even like tone of voice and like the stuff like a submissive voice, and I noticed these things and I *don't* want to do those things and I try to notice that in myself 'cause I don't *need* to do that, I can just be myself around people.

Lizzie tells me that although dating is part of high school, she has never been interested in anyone:

**Paulina:** You've never dated anyone in high school?

**Lizzie:** No. I've never dated ever. It's just not... honestly it hasn't been a big priority, I don't think about it. Ever [laughs]. Um...yea. And I've never really, really really been interested in anyone.

It is significant that the majority of the girls in this study were not invested in relationships. Their resistance to dating provides a version of girlhood that is not consistent with the stories generally told in the media and popular culture, where relationships (especially heterosexual ones) are viewed as the "happy ending" every girl dreams of. As these narratives illustrate, dating was simply *not* a priority for these girls. This trend has been noted in several studies, especially among working class girls (for example, Brown 1998, Bettie, 2003, Zaslow, 2009). For example, Zaslow (2009) found that the inner city girls in her study rejected male partnerships, and instead idealized individuality as signs of a powerful woman. Bettie (2003) also found that the working class Mexican-American girls in her ethnographic study placed little importance on relationships with males despite popular beliefs among teachers and peers regarding their supposed investment in heterosexual romance.

Thus, the girls' rejection of heterosexual relationships (both in my study and in others) is significant given the plethora of messages girls are inundated with regarding (heterosexual) relationships. Aapola, Gonick and Harris (2005) suggest that, "Heterosexuality is still too often represented as the only normal and natural sexual expression of healthy growing girls...young women *must* exhibit heterosexual desire" (p.149, emphasis mine). Interestingly, despite their resistance to dating, some of the girls

suggested that they *would* be open to the idea if an opportunity presented itself. Telling me that the boys in her school “are kinda gross and everyone knows that,” Lizzie admits that “something *could* happen. Something *crazy* could happen.” Alisha shared a similar point of view about the possibility of dating:

**Paulina:** So relationships are not important to you right now?

**Alisha:** Not really [laughs]. I mean, kind of. But I mean like you know, whatever, since I’m friends with most of my... you know like I said, it’s kind of, I just joke with them [male friends], and whatever and if... I mean, if something *does* happen... like I’m not gonna let it... but it’s just like, I’m not gonna let it take over anything. It won’t be too serious, because I really don’t find relationships functional in high-school, it’s just such a... cliché thing right now.

So while they resisted dating, some of the girls were also quick to mention that something *might* happen, so as not to evoke suspicion in their complete lack of interest in boys. As Alice told me, not having a boyfriend would not be seen as weird by people her age, her *lack* of interest in boys would be. Many of the girls often talked about feeling left out of conversations with their friends who talked about boys while they did not. Penelope for instance told me that her lack of interest in boys makes her feel left out of conversations with friends. Lizzie shared a similar feeling when she told me “sometimes I feel kind of abnormal, like I should be fussing over boys and all that stuff and I’m not”. In particular, at sleepovers with friends, Lizzie said that she does not have any “fascinating stories to tell [her friends].” As a result of not participating in a hegemonic girlhood that privileges heterosexual relationships, these girls often felt isolated from their friends. As Aapola, Gonick and Harris (2005) point out, by transgressing the rules of heteronormativity and femininity “she [woman] risks being called a ‘bad woman’ either by being defined as ‘too sexual’ or ‘not sexual enough’. If she operates outside the heterosexual norm altogether, she risks being excluded from prevailing definitions of girlhood” (p.149). So although some of the girls told me dating was not a priority, it is evident that relationships played an important part in how the girls positioned themselves, and in turn, how they were positioned by their friends and peers in school. And while the girls’ questioning and resisting of relationships in their lives is important because it provides a counter-story to the dominant messages about girls as boy obsessed, it is also important to frame their resistance to dating within the neoliberal discourse that privileges individuality. Coming across as too eager for a boyfriend,

(especially in an interview setting), would undermine many of the girls' self-made/ "can do" outlook they had on life.

## **“They’re all men. And I never understood why”: Articulating Inequality as Seeds for Resistance**

Many of the girls spoke about the “double standards” that existed among girls and boys. Alisha for instance observed that there was a double standard in the ways girls and boys were treated in relation to their sexual activities. Girls who were sexually active got called bad names whereas “the guys get propped. They get like, ‘yo that’s cool.’” She further explained that:

If you’re a guy, because you can’t get pregnant and you don’t have all those things to worry about I think it’s a little...it’s less degrading for them...you know, there’s a difference. And I would say that naturally happens that the girl always gets the...rough end of it.

Because she sees what happens to the girls in her school, Alisha is critical of and resistant to relationships. Interestingly, as presented in Chapter 4, Alisha was one of the girls who did *not* identify with feminism, yet her awareness of gender inequality suggests that she is cognizant of girls' subordinate position in society. In our discussion of Beyonce's 2011 song “*Run the World (Girls)*”, which Alisha and Penelope used in their film, I ask the two girls (interviewed together) whether in fact girls run the world:

**Alisha:** it’s almost like the underground...like the neck to the head...and we turn...you know what I mean?

**Penelope:** No [laughs].

**Alisha:** like even though guys are like the head, we’re like the neck...like we’re not the face of the poster, but we’re the background...and she’s like [Beyonce] “we’re like the foundation of what they built”. First of all, man wouldn’t be born without a woman anyways [laughs]. There you go.

Shortly after Alisha’s comment, Penelope observes:

I don’t know...um...like when you think of the government, it’s like...they’re all men. And I never understood why....I don’t know if it’s

because men are more inclined to run for it, or maybe women just realize that it's [such] hard work with so many men that they just don't even try.

It is interesting how to see how these girls tried to make sense of and articulate the inequality they see around them. Although they never used the word *sexism*, let alone *patriarchy* or *oppression*, their awareness of these things is evident and significant because of its potential to fuel resistance.

Louanne, who generally thought feminists were "crazy," nevertheless articulated her frustrations at the sexist comments and jokes boys made in her school about girls. For instance, she told me that many of the boys often made jokes about the kitchen as a women's place. She explained, "go make me a sandwich" was a common joke aimed at girls in her school:

**Paulina:** So who has ever said that to you? ["go make me a sandwich"]

**Louanne:** All the boys.

**Paulina:** Where? At school?

**Louanne:** At school. I think they just think it's funny, they don't understand that you know, just 'cause I'm a woman doesn't mean I should be in the kitchen. That was like way back before women had the opportunities to vote, or get jobs or do anything, right? And the fact that they say like "make me a sandwich" or "shouldn't you be in the kitchen?", like, they're just jokes but...it limits her from so many opportunities.

In this exchange, Louanne speaks in the first person, but towards the end of her comment, she says "it limits *her*" rather than "it limits *me*." This echoes an issue raised in Chapter 4 where girls' viewed feminism and girl power as something that does not affect them. However, as her comment above illustrates, Louanne *is* aware that women are still viewed in stereotypical ways by boys, and that what society expects from women has remained, in many ways unchanged. This was exemplified when I asked Louanne about some of the contradictions in her PowerPoint presentation:

**Paulina:** So you say this "I can be whatever I want", but then you're also saying that you're expected to be something else...how does that play out in your life?

**Louanne:** I think I can do whatever I want...But like society...like those jokes...expect women to be the ones at home, taking care of the



kids, while men are like, you know, making the money, bringing home the dough, and I'm like, "well that's what society wants and expects from me, but that's not what I want for myself."

So although this statement contradicts Louanne's previous statements regarding women's role in the home as something of the past, it is evident that Louanne understands that women are still pressured to be at home "taking care of the kids". Her resistance to doing what society expects of her is important as it highlights her struggle to carve out an alternate identity for herself—one that is not only discouraged in society but also among her family. Wanting to be a police officer, Louanne understands that this path is not an easy one to take. As she explains, her mother does not want her to become a police officer because "she's like, "it's *dangerous* for a girl".

Lola, was the most articulate on the topic of sexism in the sense that she was able to name some of the inequalities that exist. She echoed many of the girls' observations of and experiences with sexism. Lola negotiated what it means to be a girl by participating in what she referred to as "oppressive" practices such as shaving (as discussed in Chapter 5). However Lola also articulated inequalities based not only on gender, but on race and ability as well. In many ways, echoing Simone de Beauvoir's (1949) idea about women as the "second sex," Lola articulates a deep understanding of the intersections between gender and other identity positions. She observed:

I feel like the worst thing you can be in this world...in society's eyes would be to be a Black female who's disabled. I feel like that would be the *worst* thing in society's eyes. So I feel a female is like an extra weight. You're raised in this society that's like...almost the beginning of time...kinda the second in place.

In another interview, Lola told me about a conversation between her and her father about men and women's soccer:

...one time I was talking to him about like how... we call it soccer and then we call it women's soccer. And I was like, "Dad why don't they call it men's soccer and women's soccer, why don't they call both of them *soccer*? And he was like, "well, because one's just soccer and the other one has women in it". We had this *big* debate about it, like I don't think he understood *what* I was trying to say... it just wasn't an issue for him, as it was for me.

This comment signifies Lola's struggle articulating sexism to her father who did not see it as an important issue. Lola also pointed out that when it comes to sexuality, girls are usually the ones who bear the burden of protecting themselves not only from pregnancy and diseases, but also from boys (See Aapola, Gonick & Harris, 2005). For example, Lola pointed out that girls were taught how to protect themselves from rape in her sexual education class. In response to this, Lola incredulously asked:

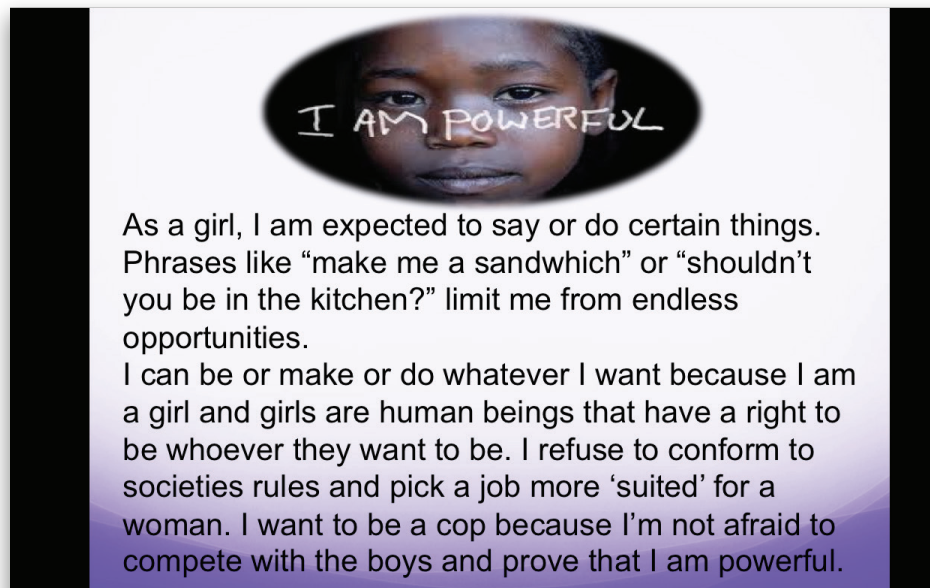
Why don't you teach guys not to rape girls? Like why don't you just teach guys not to do that? Like obviously as a girl, you'll protect yourself no matter what, you're gonna do the best you can do, it's just a defense mechanism, it's natural for anyone to defend yourself usually, the best way you feel you can. But it's like, why don't you teach guys not to rape us? [laughs]. Or sexually assault us?

As is evident in this narrative, Lola is critical of the sexual education curriculum which she sees as perpetuating a double standard in which boys are free to express their sexuality but girls are not. Arguing that girls are "encouraged to be looked at and not actually to look at ourselves really that much," Lola tapped into a popular discourse of "boys will be boys" in which boys' behaviour is excused as being part of their nature. Later, she critiques this popular saying by suggesting:

"girls will be girls" too, like in a way, we have our own hormones and like we have our own like, desires...and it's like if they have an excuse, why can't we have our own excuse.

Not only is she exercising her own sexual agency, Lola also bursts the "no-win" situation Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz (2009) describe when they talk about the double standards that position girls as either "sluts" if they pay too much attention to boys, or "lesbians" if they don't (p. 194). She speaks unapologetically about girls' desires, which is not always an easy thing to do, especially in a culture that silences girls' sexual experiences and desires (Lamb, 2002).

The girls' articulation of inequality was an important part of this study. Although some of the girls believed that men and women are "equal" now, it was difficult to ignore their resistant accounts to gender inequality (for example, see Figure 14).



**Figure 14.** “I am powerful”

*Note:* Capture image from Louanne’s PowerPoint, *Girlhood* (2012). Used with permission.

However, what was often very visible was the girls’ submersion in the dominant discourses that suggest equality between the sexes has been achieved, and therefore feminism is no longer needed. These popular beliefs devalue the girls’ feelings of sexism in their own lives, and make any critique of sexism, patriarchy or misogyny, appear like “complaining” or “playing the victim”. This often made it difficult for the girls to fully articulate what they were experiencing, but nonetheless, their accounts strongly suggest that when given the opportunity to talk, girls know that something is not right. Whether they see gender inequality at school and among friends, in the government, or even at home, girls’ resistance to gender inequality cannot be ignored.

## Summary

As the findings in this section illustrate, the girls in this study resisted dominant representations of what it means to be a girl in various ways. Their resistance to beauty practices as well as their critique of other girls whom they viewed as more invested in looking a certain way are examples of resistance because they exemplify a critique of the institutions that create these hegemonic discourses of girlhood. However, what is

significant is that the girls often lacked the critical language to *describe* the sources of their frustrations, and thus took out their frustrations out on other girls who were more invested and perhaps more “successful” in performing the kind of girlhood that was seen most desirable by media’s/society’s standards. Thus while many of the girls described instances of sexism (as well as racism) in their lives, they lacked the language that would enable them to name their experiences.

My findings strongly suggest that girls *do* have an understanding of sexism, their reluctance to use this term to describe their experiences may have something to do with their unwillingness to be seen as “victims”. As Lizzie and Lauren explicitly told me, they did not want to appear like “victims” in their film “We don’t buy it!”. To suggest that the girls’ experiences were a result of sexism or racism would mean that they acknowledge girls’ and women’s subordinate position in society, which is something many of the girls did not believe to be true, at least not in North America (see Chapter 4).

However as this chapter illustrates, resistance is a tricky practice to pinpoint because at times resistance can also look like conformity. For example, the girls’ resistance to other girls’ style may be read as girls’ conformity to engage in a culture that encourages competition and jealousy among girls (Brown, 2003). Another important point to address is that resistance is not always available as an option for all girls equally (Aapola, Gonick & Harris, 2005; Harris, 2004) nor is it always desired. Although many of the girls in this study resisted what it means to be a girl in various (and often similar ways), they often did so in ways that did not jeopardize their identities as “girls”. This is significant because it suggests that complete resistance to being a “girl” would be an unacceptable identity for the girls to take up as the “rules” governing acceptable (heterosexual, pretty, smart, White, etc.) girlhood are so deeply ingrained in society and in the lives of girls.

## Chapter 7.

### Conclusion

In this study, I wanted to gain a deeper understanding of how girls make sense of what it means to be a 'girl' in a time where the media and popular culture, as well as the academic literature, is heavily invested in *all things girl*. Specifically, my research question in this study was: *How do girls understand, negotiate and resist dominant discourses of girlhood?* Also, because I wanted to address the gap in the literature regarding girls' media production, I also sought to understand: *What stories do girls tell in their own media produced texts? Do these stories run counter to dominant discourses and images of girlhood or do they reproduce dominant discourses?* My research findings with my eight participants were strongly in line with much of the existing literature, but also revealed some interesting and potentially important divergences, which I will summarize below. I will also discuss the limitations of this study, as well as its implications for future directions in my own work.

Many of my findings were consistent with previous literature on girls. The most striking similarity, between this study and previous literature in the field, was the ways in which the participants spoke about feminism. In particular, the participants in this study strongly evoked a neoliberal and postfeminist discourse when describing what it means to be a girl. There was consensus among many of the participants that feminism was no longer needed, because in their minds, equality had already been achieved. This is in line with much of the literature with girls since the 1990's (for example: Budgeon, 1998; Lemish, 1998), as well as more current literature (Raby & Pomerantz 2011; Zaslow, 2009; Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009; 2007). However, what was interesting in this study was the participants' insistence that feminism *was* necessary in Muslim countries. This is something that I did not come across in much of the literature I examined. And so although many of the participants *did* identify gender inequality in North American society, they did not view themselves as *personally* affected by it (also Budgeon, 1998)

and suggested instead that feminism can help the girls in Muslim countries. The participants' difficulty in articulating what feminism was, suggests a general gap in understanding the term. Because the majority of the participants drew on stereotypical images of "crazy" feminists who go "too far" in their search for gender equality, suggests that feminist educators have a long way to go in educating girls and young women about feminism.

Another central theme that emerged out of my findings, and was also consistent with the literature, was the contradictory nature of girls' talk. Feminist post-structural scholars have suggested that contradictions in girls' talk are not problematic because they illustrate their complex identity constructions (Raby & Pomerantz, 2011; Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009, 2007). What was interesting to see in this study was that these contradictions in girls' talk often arose during our discussions regarding 'choice', feminism and girl power, as well as gender inequity. Many of the participants acknowledged various forms of inequality, but because they did not have the language to *articulate* what these forms of inequality were (for instance: misogyny, sexism, patriarchy), they quickly reverted back to the neoliberal discourse of choice. It was during these moments, that the contradictions in girls' talk were most apparent. As these contradictions make apparent, girls would greatly benefit from feminism because it would offer them a framework in which they could articulate and critique the inequalities they observe in their lives.

Finally, intersectionality was an important theme in my findings. Intersectionality provides a complex understanding of how race, ethnicity, language, sexuality, ability (and other intersecting identities) shape people's identities and experience (see Crenshaw, 1991 and Jiwani 2006). As my findings illustrate, most of the girls' understandings of 'what it means to be a girl' were shaped by their racial, ethnic, and class positions. Because 'girl' as an identity category, has been traditionally marked as White, middle-class, able-bodied and heterosexual (Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009), anything outside of this category is deemed "deviant". For the girls in my study who "deviated" from this category in some way or another, their negotiation and/or resistance to dominant discourses of girlhood played out in very different ways.

Also, as much as intersectionality played an important role in the identity constructions of the girls I interviewed, very rarely was race or class explicitly mentioned by the girls. As Bettie (2003) has suggested, class is often believed to be invisible, and thus rarely gets mentioned in studies with girls, while issues of race are seen as taboo in a society that privileges the discourse of colour-blindness. It is possible that the girls' internalization of these beliefs led them to avoid talking about class and race, but perhaps my own lack of experience and hesitations in talking about these things with girls in an interview setting resulted in this gap in the conversations. I will further discuss the limitations of this study below.

## Limitations

One of the major limitations of this study concerns the girls' media productions. As Bloustien has noted, "as a recording instrument, the camera is *always* used with an audience in mind" (Bloustien, p.46, emphasis mine). In turn, it is important to acknowledge that the girls in this study created their films for *me*, and for this study. Two of the girls expressed this awareness to me during our discussion of their film. For example, when I asked them why they chose to include a clip from the film *Miss Representation* in their own film, Penelope told me, "I thought it was a good idea because it was super similar to what your study was on". So as much as I wanted to "even out" the power dynamics between "researcher" and "participant" through the use of film, it is evident from this example, that the researcher (in this case me) still had influence over the girls' films.

This points to a similar limitation regarding my interview data. Girls often expressed their hope that what they said during their interviews would be "useful" to my study. I found this interesting, because I never indicated to any of my participants that I was looking for anything specific regarding their responses. It is highly possible then, that some of their responses were catered to what they believed I wanted to hear.

Also, it is important to mention that as a beginning "researcher", I may have asked certain questions more freely than others. For example, I was able to question the girls about issues of gender, feminism, and girl power, yet I did not ask specific

questions about class and race, which were no doubt, also important to the identity constructions of the girls in my study. My own dis/comfort and hesitation with addressing certain issues and asking specific questions is a result of my own positionality as a White, working class woman.

Time was also a major limitation in this study. Although all eight of the participants expressed a keen interest in making their own film for this study, their busy schedules made completing their films (within the 6-8 week time-frame) extremely difficult. In turn, I allowed the girls to complete their films by mid-February, nearly 6 months after the start of my project. Even then, two of the girls did not complete a film for this project, and one girl completed a PowerPoint instead of a film. As one of my goals was to add to the scant literature on film production among girls, I had hoped to get a broader sense of the kinds of themes that would emerge from these films. In the end, I was only able to analyze three films (and one PowerPoint) that were completed for this study.

Finally, my small sample size is another limitation in this study. With only eight participants, it is difficult (if not impossible) to make strong claims regarding *'what it means to be a girl'*. However, my sample size did include girls from varying backgrounds, as well as girls from different parts of the Lower Mainland.

## **Implications of Study**

The first implication of this study suggests that girls not only need the space in which they can talk about the many forms of inequality they face, but also a feminist framework that would enable them to articulate and explain the various forms of oppression they experience. As my study revealed, many of the girls expressed a keen awareness of gender inequality not only in the media and popular culture, but also in their schools, and at home. There was often a sense of frustration among the girls as they tried to come to terms with girls' subordinate position in society. They felt strongly about the misrepresentation of girls and women in popular culture, and resisted messages regarding how girls are supposed to look and behave. However, because they relied heavily on neoliberal and postfeminist discourse to describe their experiences



as girls, they were unable to move beyond an individualized framework of resistance. This signals a profound failure on the part of education in providing girls (and boys) with a useful framework for understanding gender inequality. As many of the girls told me, feminism was simply *not* something they learned about in school, and if it was mentioned, it did not take up as much time in the curriculum as other subjects. Interestingly, several of the girls did mention learning about women in other parts of the world, such as Saudi Arabia. It is perhaps this focus on Other women, which leads them to believe that feminism is no longer necessary in Canada. This is not only problematic to girls' understandings of feminism in a Western context, but also to their understandings of "girls" globally. It is therefore pertinent that these discussions enter into the discourse at schools, especially among educators, who often serve as role-models for students.

A second implication for this study is for educators and scholars wishing to undertake visual research with youth. In particular, as my study has shown, the creation of films with girls has transformative possibilities. As many of the girls in my study revealed, making their films was not only "fun", but also allowed them to reflect on what it means to be a girl. Also, as the girls who made their own film suggested, filmmaking is an important form of self-expression, and a good way of getting a message across.

For educators wishing to incorporate media production into their classrooms, this has exciting possibilities. However, it is important to note that media production without critical media literacy skills risks reproducing inequality (Kellner, 2009). It is easy to romanticize the resistant potentials of media production, but without a framework for understanding how the media works to reproduce inequality, one cannot hope for transformation to occur.

It is also important for educators and scholars to acknowledge that any film produced as part of a school or research project may cater to meet the demands of the teacher, or as in the case of my study, the perceived expectations of the researcher. Also, as my findings show, the girls' distancing of themselves through their film is a possible strategy of resistance (Chapter 6), which helps maintain a space between their 'true' selves, and the selves they wish to present to others. This must be taken into

account when making observations, or drawing conclusions about 'girls' in their media produced texts.

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## **Appendices**



## Appendix A.

### Participant Consent Form

Media Production as Resistance: Exploring young girls' visions of "girlhood"

Ethics application #: 2011s0387

#### CONSENT FORM TO PARTICIPATE IN STUDY

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Paulina Semeneć-Michalak, and I am a graduate student at Simon Fraser University. I am interested in understanding how young girls (ages 14-17) read and interpret mainstream representations of what it means to be "a girl" in today's society. For example, when young girls see popular singers or movie stars acting "sexy", how does this help to shape young girls' identity? Do young girls aspire to be like these popular icons, or do they in some way "resist" these popular representations and carve out their own identity? I am seeking out your participation in my thesis project.

This project will include informal interviews (both individual and in focus groups with other participants) as well as the creation of a movie. In this project, you will be asked to create your own short film (maximum 5 minutes in length) about what it means to be a "girl".

In order to participate in this study, you must be available to meet approximately once per week for a maximum of one hour each time, for about 6-8 weeks. During these meetings you will participate in informal interviews with me and sometimes with other girls participating in the study in the form of a focus group. By consenting to participate in the focus group, you confirm that any information you encounter will be kept confidential and not revealed to parties outside the focus group. If you and your parent/guardian give consent, all interviews will be audio-recorded so I can know exactly what you said. I will always share these transcripts with you and you can always change or delete anything you said. All of this information will be kept strictly confidential, and only the researcher and my graduate program supervisor will have access to this information.

To participate in this study, you must be interested in media, popular culture, and also be interested in making your own film. You do not need to have access to a video camera or film editing software. You also do not need to have prior experience using a video camera or know how to make a film. Arrangements will be made to provide the necessary equipment and training to complete the film.

Your anonymity and confidentiality will be maintained in this study. For example, your real name will never be used in any discussions of the project. Your participation in this study is voluntary, so if at any point during the project you decide you don't want to be involved, you can withdraw by letting me, or my graduate program supervisor know. At that point, the data I have about you will be destroyed. By consenting to participate in the focus group, you confirm that any information you encounter will be kept confidential and not revealed to parties outside the focus group.

Although the objective is to maintain confidentiality, it cannot be guaranteed.

Upon completion of this project, you will receive a CD-ROM with a copy of the film you created, and a small gift of appreciation. You will not receive copies of any of the films the other

participants created. If you are interested in participating in this study, please send me an email stating your interest in this project by \_\_\_\_\_ (one week after sending the invitation to participate in study). Also, please have your guardian(s) carefully read the guardian consent form (please see attached to email).

You will be asked to bring both consent forms with your signature as well as the parental consent form with your guardians' signature(s) to our first meeting. **Please note, that I will require your guardian(s) contact information after this first meeting in order to confirm that they have given their consent for you to participate in this study.**

Thank you very much for your time and consideration,

Paulina Semenec-Michalak, M.A Candidate

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

If you have any questions or concerns about this project, please contact Dr. Hal Weinberg, Director of Office of Research Ethics or her senior supervisor Dr. Özlem Sensoy:

**Dr. Hal Weinberg**

Director of Office of Research Ethics

Simon Fraser University, Burnaby BC

Email: [REDACTED]

Özlem Sensoy, Senior Supervisor

Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Education

Simon Fraser University, Burnaby BC

Email: [REDACTED]

If you are interested in the research results, please contact the researcher, Paulina Semenec-Michalak or her Senior Supervisor Dr. Özlem Sensoy:

Paulina Semenec-Michalak

Phone: [REDACTED]

Email: [REDACTED]

**Özlem Sensoy, Senior Supervisor**  
**Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Education**  
**Simon Fraser University, Burnaby BC**  
**Email:** [REDACTED]  
**Phone:** [REDACTED]

## Appendix B.

### Parental Consent Form

#### CONSENT FORM FOR YOUR CHILD TO PARTICIPATE IN STUDY

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Paulina Semeneč-Michalak, and I am a graduate student at Simon Fraser University. I am interested in understanding how young girls (14-17 years old) understand and interpret mainstream representations of what it means to be “a girl” in today’s society, and am seeking your child’s participation in this study.

This study will include informal interviews (both individual and in focus groups with other participants) as well as the creation of a movie. In this project, participants will be asked to create their own short film (maximum 5 minutes in length) about what it means to be a “girl”.

Information acquired in this study will be useful to educators interested in teaching media literacy and will provide them with a good understanding of the importance of media literacy for young girls in particular. It will also be useful for educators of social justice who are considering the utility of media production for developing social justice literacy among youth. This study may also be useful for expanding current film programs for youth among local organizations and non-profits.

In order to participate in this study, your child must be available to meet approximately once per week for a maximum of one hour each time, for approximately 6-8 weeks. During these meetings your child will participate in informal interviews with me and sometimes with other girls participating in the study. If you and your child give consent, all interviews will be audio-recorded so I can know exactly what was said. I will always share these transcripts with your child who can always change or delete anything she said. All of this information will be kept strictly confidential, and only my graduate program supervisor and myself as the researcher will have access to this information.

To participate in this study, your child must be interested in media, popular culture, and also be interested in making her own film. She does not need to have access to a video camera or film editing software. She also does not need to have prior experience using a video camera or know how to make a film. Arrangements will be made to provide the necessary equipment and training to complete the film.

Your child’s anonymity and confidentiality will also be maintained in this study. For example, her real name will never be used in any discussions of the project. However, her participation in this study is voluntary, so if at any point during the project she or you decide you don’t want her to be involved, you can withdraw your consent by just letting me or my graduate program supervisor know. At that point, any data I have about your child will be destroyed.

Upon completion of this project, your child will receive a CD-ROM with a copy of her film, and a small gift of appreciation. Your child’s film will not be given out to any of the other participants in this study.

Please put a check mark below stating that you give consent to have your child participate in this project. Your child will bring this signed consent form to her first meeting with me. I will also be

asking your child for your contact information (phone number (preferred) or email) and contact you within 24 hours of my first meeting with your child. This will be to ensure that you have given your full consent for your child to participate in this study.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration,  
Paulina Semenec-Michalak, M.A Candidate

\_\_\_ Yes, I give consent to have my child participate in this study

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

If you have any questions or concerns about this project, please contact Dr. Hal Weinberg, Director of Office of Research Ethics or her senior supervisor Özlem Sensoy:

Primary Contacts:

Dr. Hal Weinberg  
Director of Office of Research Ethics  
Simon Fraser University, Burnaby BC  
Email: [REDACTED]

Özlem Sensoy, Senior Supervisor  
Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Education  
Simon Fraser University, Burnaby BC  
Email: [REDACTED]  
Phone: [REDACTED]

For research results, please contact the researcher, Paulina Semenec-Michalak or her Senior Supervisor Dr. Özlem Sensoy:

Paulina Semenec-Michalak  
Phone: [REDACTED]  
Email: [REDACTED]

**Özlem Sensoy, Senior Supervisor**  
**Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Education**  
**Simon Fraser University, Burnaby BC**  
Email: [REDACTED]  
Phone: [REDACTED]

## Appendix C.

### Sample of wording of invitation to participants

(sent via email)

Hi \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Paulina—we met at the Reel Youth Care to Change film workshop in May. You had expressed interest at the time about my research project on media and girlhood and I am contacting you now to give you more details about my project.

[Alternatively: My name is Paulina Semeneć-Michalak. You were suggested to me as a potential participant by (Jane Smith). She felt you might be interested in my research project on media and girlhood and I am contact you to give you details about my project and if you're interested, invite your participation.]

I have attached a consent form, which also includes some more information regarding my project. If you are interested and able to participate in this project, please read the consent form carefully, and also give your parents the consent form to read. You can then send me an email stating that both you and your parents agree for you to participate in this study, and we can sign the paperwork when we meet.

Please let me know if you have any questions about this project. No question is too small! If you are interested, please get in touch with me by [date one week from sent-date of email]. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Best,

Paulina

## Appendix D.

### Interview Guides

<b>Interview #1</b> <b>Date:</b> _____  <b>Participant name:</b>	<b>Notes:</b>
Tell me about yourself. Where do you go to school, what grade you are in, etc.	
Do you enjoy school? Do you think you are a “good” student?	
How would you describe your school? Are there any cliques? What does it mean to be “cool” or “trendy” at your school?	
Is it important for you to be a part of a group? Why or why not?	
Have you ever gotten into trouble at school?	
Tell me about your family. Do you have any siblings, what is your relationship like with them and your parents?  What kind of TV shows do you like to watch? Why do you like them?	
What do you think about the way young people (girls in particular) are depicted in the shows/films that you like?	
What popular icons (musicians, artists, etc.) do you like? Why do you like them?  What music do you listen to?	
Do you have many close friends? How would you describe your relationships with them?	



<p><b>Interview #2</b></p> <p><b>Date:</b> _____</p> <p><b>Participant name:</b></p>	<p><b>Notes:</b></p>
<p>Do you read teen magazines? Why or why not? What about when you were younger?</p>	
<p>What do you think is the main message of these magazines?</p>	
<p>Do you find some of the information in these magazines useful? Why or why not?</p>	
<p>Where do you go for advice on these kinds of things (boys, fashion, beauty, etc).</p>	
<p>What kind of stories would you like to see included in a magazine for girls?</p>	
<p>Do you think girls today have many options of how and what to be?</p>	
<p>Is it hard being a girl? Why or why not?</p>	
<p>What do you think about “girl power”? What does it mean to you?</p>	
<p>What do you know about feminism? Is it important to you? Why or why not?</p> <p>When do you feel most empowered?</p>	

<b>Interview #3</b> <b>Date:</b> _____ <b>Participant name:</b>	<b>Notes:</b>
Describe the process of making your film.	
What would you say is the underlying message of your film?	
What was the most challenging thing you encountered when making your film?	
Do you think making the film helped you think about certain things you've never thought of before? Like what? Was this important to you?	
Do you think making films is important for girls? Why or why not?	