

**'Buying into Sexy':  
Preteen Girls and Consumer Capitalism in the Twenty-First Century**

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**A Thesis in the  
Special Individualized Program**

**Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements**

**For the Degree of Master of Arts at**

**Concordia University**

**Montreal, Quebec, Canada**

**March, 2008**

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*Your file    Votre référence*

*ISBN: 978-0-494-40990-9*

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*ISBN: 978-0-494-40990-9*

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **“Buying Into Sexy”:**

#### **Preteen Girls and Consumer Capitalism in the Twenty First Century**

Lilia Goldfarb

We live in a hypersexualized society that infantilizes women and commodifies girls at the service of the capitalist system. In recent years, Quebec and other Western societies, have witnessed a rising concern about preadolescent girls showing signs of precocious sexualization. This issue, dismissed by some as a media moral panic and proof of girls’ increased social power and agency, is taken very seriously by many others who worry about the impact it seems to be having on girls’ well-being: unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), eating disorders, depression, self-harm, increased vulnerability to violence as well as a number of other negative health outcomes (APA, 2007).

As the media continues to represent women as sexual objects they foster early sexualization, since they not only sell products and audiences but also an ideology that normalizes sexualized attitudes and behaviours (Agger, 2006). On the one hand, the 21st century North American corporate culture “seduces” girls with offerings of glitter, popularity and fame through sexualized popular cultural icons, via the media, operating at the service of and controlled by powerful economic interests; on the other hand, girls are blamed for letting themselves be lured into dressing and/or acting in oversexualized ways. Girls are caught in the crossfire between competing *scripts*: “Be sexy! Popular girls are” and “Good girls don’t”. I have named girls’ attempts to conciliate and harmonize these competing scripts into a coherent whole: Cultural Script Theory.

## **Dedication**

To the twenty wonderful girls who shared their thoughts and made this thesis possible: Amrita, Anita, Ashley, Deepa, Emma, Januca, Jessica, Kelly, Larissa, Layla, Magala, Marie, Marisha, Nadia, Pearl, Shameeka, Shana, Tanya, Tashika and Toni. You have helped me ground theory into practice, which will –hopefully- serve other girls like you for years to come.

To Lucie, Delia, Zéa, Ella, Charlotte, Ruby, Eva and all the other little girls, may you grow up to explore your sexuality in your own terms, free from external interference and when you are truly ready.

And finally to Professor Lillian Robinson, *in memoriam*, thank you for encouraging the scholar within me.

## **Acknowledgements**

There are many people who need to be acknowledged and thanked for the support and encouragement they have offered me through this very long and windy process:

My dear advisor Sandra Weber, for being so generous with your time and for your patient and loving encouragement and support. Without it, I am not sure I would have made it through. To my other advisors: Gilbert Emond and Eric Shragge for taking the time to give me feedback, encouragement in spite of gruelling schedules.

My team and colleagues at work for your continued help and loving support, as well as your dedication to girls and women, you have truly enriched my understanding of the issues. A very special thanks to Carlye and Jade for your precious assistance with this research, Emily and Susan for being so generous with your time in giving me feedback on the text. France-Line for finding the space for me to work while writing the first draft and your ongoing willingness to cook for me and discuss and clarify concepts; also Bernard, who retrieved my first draft from a dead hard drive, you are my hero!

My dear friends who have encouraged and supported me so much; particularly Rosie as well as B., Kate, Michael and Dodi, my supper club friends who have patiently listened to my ramblings over the years. My beautiful family, Amber you get a special thanks for taking over household duties so I could concentrate on writing.

My partners at UQAM: Irène, Francine, Anne and Geneviève for working with me on these issues and the centres and counsellors who collaborated in this research. And last but not least Sophie for your willingness to embark on this work: teaching with me and making a truly amazing video!

## Table of Contents

Chapter I: GIRLS, THE MEDIA AND PRECOCIOUS SEXUALIZATION	p. 1
I. Precocious Sexualization: Statement of the Problem	p. 3
1. <i>Defining Sexualization</i>	p. 4
2. <i>Who Benefits?</i>	p. 9
II. Purpose of this Research	p. 12
III. Research Questions	p. 12
IV. Relevance of this Research	p. 13
Chapter II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE AND OTHER RELEVANT CONCEPTS	p. 15
I. Theories about Systems:	p. 15
1. <i>Luhmann</i>	
2. <i>Scripted Girlhood: Cultural Script Theory</i>	p. 17
3. <i>Transversality, Consubstantiality and Intersectionality</i>	p. 18
II. Women and the Body	p. 19
1. <i>Social Constructionism</i>	p. 20
2. <i>Bodily Disciplines</i>	p. 21
3. <i>Girl Power</i>	p. 23
III. Capitalism's Influence on Bodies	p. 25
1. <i>The Capitalist System in the Twenty-First Century</i>	p. 25
2. <i>Simulacra and the Media</i>	p. 26
3. <i>The Quest for the Perfect Self</i>	p. 27

4. <i>The Rise of Consumerism</i>	p. 28
5. <i>The Performing Body</i>	p. 31
6. <i>Constructing the Tween</i>	p. 32
IV. Examining Embodiment	p. 37
1. <i>Body Image and Body Schema</i>	p. 37
2. <i>The Contribution of Biological Processes</i>	p. 38
3. <i>The Contribution of Environmental Processes</i>	p. 41
4. <i>The Contribution of Developmental Processes</i>	p. 41
5. <i>The Contribution of the Media</i>	p. 43
5. 1 <i>Objectification and Shame</i>	p. 43
5. 2 <i>Cultivation Theory and Popular Music</i>	p. 44
Chapter III: DESIGNING, CONTEXTUALIZING AND CONDUCTING	
THE STUDY	p. 45
I. Research Goals Restated	p. 45
II. Context for the Study	p. 45
1. <i>Professional Interest and Community Engagement</i>	p. 45
2. <i>Choice of Population: Why this Age Group Now?</i>	p. 46
3. <i>Research Questions</i>	p. 46
III. Research Methodology: Theory and Models	p. 47
1. <i>Why Action-Research?</i>	p. 48
2. <i>Feminist Action-Research: A Guide for Interpretation</i>	p. 49
3. <i>Practitioner Research</i>	p. 51
IV. Conducting the Research	p. 52

1. <i>Research Assistants</i>	p. 53
2. <i>Participant Recruitment, Ethics and Safety</i>	p. 54
3. <i>Peer Focus Groups</i>	p. 55
4. <i>Conducting the Group Interviews (Focus Groups)</i>	p. 56
5. <i>Counsellor Participation</i>	p. 56
IV. Description of the Focus Groups	p. 57
1. <i>Description of Group A</i>	p. 58
2. <i>Description of Group B</i>	p. 59
3. <i>Description of Group C</i>	p. 61
V. Group Interview Methods	p. 61
1. <i>Photo-Elicitation</i>	p. 61
2. <i>Drawing Self-Portraits</i>	p. 62
3. <i>Additional Interview Strategies: “Talking Ball” and Role-Play</i>	p. 63
VI. Analysis of Data	p. 64
1. <i>Concept Maps</i>	p. 64
2. <i>Emerging Themes</i>	p. 64
3. <i>Quality of Data Collection and Interpretation</i>	p. 66
Chapter IV: CRITIQUING OF BUYING INTO SEXY? ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF THE FINDINGS	p. 68
I. The Meta Narrative or Script	p. 69
II. Narrative Themes	p. 71
1. <i>Transgressing Gender Norms of Appearance and Behaviour</i>	p. 71
2. <i>Heteronormativity</i>	p. 74



3. <i>'Doing Gender': Theorizing Normative Views</i>	p. 77
4. <i>Bodies: The Unfinished Project</i>	p. 78
5. <i>Body Conundrum: To Be or Not to Be Sexy</i>	p. 79
6. <i>Bodies: The Burden of Fat</i>	p. 83
7. <i>Sexiness: Ambivalence and Importance</i>	p. 85
8. <i>Sexiness and Popularity</i>	p. 94
9. <i>Popularity and Meanness</i>	p. 95
10. <i>Boys and Harassment</i>	p. 96
11. <i>Dangerous Men</i>	p. 100
12. <i>Popular Music and Representations of Women</i>	p. 102
13. <i>Pornography</i>	p. 107

III. Revisiting the Group Narrative	p. 109
-------------------------------------	--------

## Chapter V: FINDINGS. IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND FURTHER

RESEARCH	p. 112
----------	--------

I. Issues for Further Discussion	p. 112
----------------------------------	--------

1. <i>Scripted Girlhoods</i>	p. 112
------------------------------	--------

2. <i>Sexualization or Sexuality?</i>	p. 113
---------------------------------------	--------

3. <i>Girls and Agency</i>	p. 114
----------------------------	--------

II. Implications for Practice	p. 119
-------------------------------	--------

1. <i>Working with Girls, Bodies, Beauty Norms, and the Media</i>	p. 119
---	--------

2. <i>Age and the Re-writing of Scripts</i>	p. 121
---	--------

3. <i>Understanding Power in Girls' Lives</i>	p. 122
---	--------

4. <i>Our Work with Adults: Fostering Family Resilience</i>	p. 123
---	--------

III. Further Research p. 125

IV. Concluding Remarks p. 127

References p. 129

Appendices:

Appendix A: Samples of participants' artwork

Appendix B: Consent forms

## Chapter I

### GIRLS, THE MEDIA AND PRECOCIOUS SEXUALIZATION

#### I. Introduction

I am a community activist who works with girls and teens. I approach *precocious sexualization*, the core theme of this thesis, as a feminist and practitioner who uses research as a means to understand relevant issues and to act, aligning myself with the great human narratives of peace, harmony and social justice. The precocious sexualization of girls in Western society disturbs such narratives, as the following quote from Seaton (2005) suggests:

Are girls not only addressed by society's synchronic rhythms, social policies, and ideological reproductions as adult females but also responding to these mediations in embodied ways? If discourse (pace Foucault) creates its own productivities, what new bodies are produced by advanced capitalism? Here's one deterministic and rather crude answer: Perhaps young girls are becoming the only thing of value in this new world of de-valued laboring bodies –the value of commodified sexual objects? This is a response which is evocative of Henry Giroux's contention that "corporate culture's promotion of the sexualization of children has shortened the distance between childhood and adulthood" (2000:16). Similarly, this response echoes the parental panics ensuing from the current 'pop-tart' look of bared midriffs, 'junior thong' underwear, and hip-hugger jeans cut down to the pubis favored by pre-teen girls (Fulsang 2002). However, such answers are too expedient and not explanatory enough. They do not go far enough in attempting to deal with the multi-faceted milieu that revolves around this troublesome subject. (p. 40)

We live in a hypersexualized society that infantilizes women and commodifies girls at the service of the capitalist system. Current available explanations do not go far enough in helping us frame and understand the complexity of these phenomena in all their facets. My quest for understanding and action on these issues is the driving force behind this research.

I have been researching precocious sexualization for the past four years in the context of my studies and of my work as coordinator of a YWCA action research project on the subject. Since 2006, I also manage Leadership Services at the YWCA Montreal, a collection of programs for girls and women whose objective is to encourage the development of personal and social leadership. Our youth programs address diverse issues specific to girls through workshops that balance personal development, physical activity and self-esteem building with a critical understanding of stereotypes, socialization, violence and inequality.

In May 2005, I organized a daylong event on the sexualization of girls with the purpose of creating a space where academics, students, parents and fieldworkers could reflect on the issues and formulate recommendations that would guide my work. This well-attended event raised a number of issues; primarily, it signalled a need for the development of training programs and other pedagogical tools to sensitize, inform and educate those involved in the lives of children.<sup>1</sup> The recommendations that emerged from that day included the development of a guide for parents, training programs for health and community workers, and intervention programs aimed at school-aged children; a very large mandate that went beyond the financial resources at my disposal through my work at the YWCA.

Following these recommendations, I undertook the development of a *Guide for parents of preteen girls*<sup>2</sup>. I also approached the *Service d'aide aux collectivités* at the Université de Québec à Montréal (UQAM), a department whose mandate involves

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<sup>1</sup> See Actes de la Journée de réflexion sur la sexualisation précoce, mai 2005, available at [www.ydesfemmesmtl.org](http://www.ydesfemmesmtl.org)

<sup>2</sup> Available for free through the YWCA Montreal website: Guide for parents of preteen girls (2006). [www.ydesfemmesmtl.org](http://www.ydesfemmesmtl.org)

facilitating community/university partnerships, and requested the support of two professors, Francine Duquet and Anne Quénart, to undertake research activities and develop pedagogical tools. As a result of this partnership, research carried out by both professors is currently being analyzed. Professor Duquet and I have been separately touring the Province of Quebec offering a training program for those working with children and adolescents. A number of other pedagogical tools are being developed and a critically acclaimed film on the subject, *Sexy Inc: Our Children under Influence* was produced in 2007 by documentary filmmaker Sophie Bissonnette and the National Film Board of Canada. Besides offering training, I am a frequent speaker on the subject to a variety of audiences which include parents, women's and youth organizations, professionals working with children, educators, students, unions, government professionals and many others. Consequently, exchanges with my audiences over the past few years have informed my perspective. All the preceding notwithstanding, the issue of precocious sexualization needs further untangling.

## **II. Precocious Sexualization: Statement of the Problem**

In recent years Quebec and other Western societies have witnessed a rising concern about preadolescent girls showing signs of early or precocious sexualization. This issue, which is dismissed by some as a media moral panic<sup>3</sup> and proof of girls' increased social power and agency, is being taken very seriously by many others who worry about the impact this phenomenon seems to be having on girls' well-being. In

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<sup>3</sup>The concept of moral panic originated with British sociologist Stan Cohen (1987) and has been used to describe diverse social phenomena. Essentially, a moral panic is an exaggerated concern about some issue that is considered a 'social problem'. This concept has often been used to describe society's reaction to young people when they don't behave according to the expectations society has of them. Retrieved from <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Students/hrb9701.html>

every society sexuality is a highly symbolized human experience holding a great array of meanings. These meanings have historically been largely contained by religion and tradition and it is, therefore, not surprising that societal change affecting sexuality can be perceived as threatening by fundamentalists and as emancipatory by liberals. A critical issue proposed by Turner (1991), is that once the dominant culture uses sexuality and eroticism to promote consumerism, it is very difficult to adopt a political stance against it that will not be made to appear moralistic. Fuelling this debate, the media continues to represent women as sexual objects, and in many people's minds are largely to blame for fostering early sexualization, since they not only sell products and audiences but also promote an ideology that normalizes sexualized attitudes and behaviours at the service of corporate interests (Agger, 2006).

### ***1. Defining Sexualization***

Early or precocious sexualization is a phenomenon nestled within a larger one, the hypersexualization of society (Bouchard & Bouchard, 2003). Hypersexualization refers to the overstatement of sexuality in occidental societies which Attwood (2006) has described as *sexualized culture*. This catch phrase is used to indicate many things, among others: a public shift to permissive sexual attitudes and a blurring around what constitutes sexual propriety; a preoccupation with sexual identities, values and practices; the pursuit of individualized forms of hedonism; the breakdown of rules and regulations that used to keep the *obscene* at bay and the economic explosion in the provision of sexual services, facilitated by its location in the marketplace (Bernstein, 2001). The expression '*sexualized culture*' could also be applied to society's savouring of sexual scandals,

which has been fuelled by the emergence of new forms of sexual experience, panics and controversies around sex.

Duquet (2005) has proposed that a number of factors characterize hypersexualization as it affects youth: wearing *sexy* clothing and sexualized forms of seduction (Amadiou, 2002); the normalization of oral sex (Schwartz, 1999; Remez, 2000; Gates & Sonenstein, 2002); sexualized online ‘chatting’ and self-exposure through web cameras (Lacroix, 2004); the consumption of cyber pornography (Poulin, 2005; Marzano & Rozier, 2005); a preoccupation with sexual performance; and the normalization of marginal sexual practices (Folscheid, 2002).

When does sexuality stop being part of the natural process of development and start becoming *precocious*? After all, humans are sexual beings from the moment they are born. According to some authors (Franke-Clark, 2003; Wu & Thomson, 2001) a person under 14 years of age does not usually have the emotional maturity necessary to engage in responsible sexual relationships and, consequently, sexual activity below this age should be considered *precocious*. This view is at least partly shaped by Western culture, but the question remains about how applicable it is, or should be, within this context, particularly since as it will be explored later, many girls are reaching puberty earlier and earlier in life.

According to the APA (2007), sexualization occurs when a person’s value is based on their appearance or behaviour to the exclusion of other characteristics, when they are held to a standard equating attractiveness with being sexy, when they are seen as objects for other people’s sexual purposes, and when sexuality is imposed upon an individual. Not all conditions need to be simultaneously present for sexualization to occur

(p. 2). Healthy sexuality, on the contrary, involves mutual respect between consenting partners and an intimacy that fosters bonding and shared pleasure. This plays an important role in building mental and physical health. Consequently sexuality and sexualization are not the same thing (Satcher, 2001). This is particularly important with regards to young people, as the following quote from Lamb (2002) suggests:

When children play with children their own age there is a mutuality and equality that blesses the experience and which, if they take this into adulthood, would serve them well. But preteen sex rarely occurs in a play or exploratory context. For a girl it is often about being popular, submitting to an older boy, not losing a boyfriend, feeling wanted, or just about thinking one is becoming an adult woman. It is rarely about one's own body, feeling pleasure, or one's own sexual growth. (p. 117)

The APA (2007) has proposed that the sexualization of girls as happening within three interrelated domains: 1) *the contribution of society*: cultural values and norms communicated through the media and other means, are infused with sexualized images suggesting that this is normal and good; 2) *interpersonal contribution*: peer pressure, family and others may encourage girls' self-image as sexual objects; and 3) *self-sexualization*: as girls see that a sexualized appearance and behaviour are rewarded in society they are likely to internalize this notion and sexualize themselves. Sexualization may render the task of becoming a sexual being more difficult for girls since as Tolman (2002) has argued, girls are encouraged to look sexy before they have sexual desires, understand what it means to be sexual or are capable of making responsible and reasoned decisions about sexual risks. Although sexual appeal in young girls might appear to signal sexual availability and maturity, young girls have not yet had a chance to acknowledge or understand their own needs and desires. Moreover, while young girls are encouraged to dress like sexual women, mature women are told that to be sexy they need



to look very young, which serves to blur the lines of sexual maturity even further (Cook & Kaiser, 2004).

Millstein & Halpern-Flesher (2002) found that teenagers tend to inaccurately estimate the consequences of sexual activity, compounded by what the authors see as the exploratory and casual nature of sexual behaviour characteristic of this stage. Research has indicated that girls who become involved in precocious sexual activity have low self-esteem as opposed to boys who tend to become sexually active when their self-esteem is high (Garriguet, 2005). In turn, precocious sexuality and low self-esteem have been linked to poor condom use, increased risk of sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy, as well as other high-risk behaviours such as having multiple sexual partners, alcohol and drug abuse.

A study by Escobar-Chaves et al. (2005) published by the journal *Pediatrics*, a leader in the field of media impact on children and youth, indicates that the lower the age of the first sexual encounter, the higher the chance of having experienced coercion and the higher the risk of experiencing other forms of violence. Furthermore, the APA (2007) and others have established links between early sexualization and negative mental health outcomes including depression, suicidal thoughts, eating disorders and self-harm. *Teens Before their Time*, a report produced by the Girl Scout Research Institute in 2000, found that although the physical and cognitive maturation of preadolescent girls is taking place earlier, the timing of emotional maturation has remained unchanged.

Although studies including Lamb's (2002) show that many girls and women often feel guilty about their childhood sexual explorations, the sexual play that girls initiate in childhood helps them explore their own sensuality and what gives them pleasure.

However, sexual intercourse isn't play. According to Lamb (2002), having sex prematurely, even oral sex, appears to direct a girl's sexual development towards figuring out what the male wants. Fellatio and intercourse are practices that mainly benefit the male and in a culture of inconsequential 'sexual servicing', there is no room for girls to discover their own feelings about sex. Looking at the trend for oral sex, Lamb (2002) observed "if early sex is not a male-centered experience, if it were being demanded by girls, wouldn't it have more to do with female sexual pleasure? Instead, it has more to do with the conferring of adult woman status on a girl..." (p. 119).

Another critical issue is that, as it is often the case with the important cycles of transition in women's lives, the preteen years can be tumultuous for many girls (Pipher, 1994). As the universe of childhood disappears and the universe of *teenhood* starts opening up and shaking the foundations of their identity, some girls can feel lost. At this time, many girls symbolically enter Bentham's *Panopticon*, a prison cell where the inmate is constantly visible. Within this "cell" girls can never get away from self-consciousness and the perceived gaze that is forever judging what they look like, how they move and what they do (Foucault, 1979; Bartky, 1998). Some develop what Jungian psychologist Eisendrath (1999) calls "a compulsion to be desired and desirable" (p.2), which might serve to undermine their self-confidence, self-determination and self-direction. Girls can become trapped in identifying with their image, in being objects at the expense of becoming subjects of their own lives by learning to listen to internal body cues, what feels right to them. Recent research validates the premise that many girls and young women appear to have internalized and normalized the idea of being sexual

objects, feeding and reacting mostly to *external* cues (Levy, 2005; Kobrin, 2006). What lies behind this phenomenon?

## **2. *Who Benefits?***

A further source of concern for many researchers and practitioners is the number of industries who benefit from sexualized culture and precocious sexualization, and the level of profits these industries generate. As society has become *hyperreal*, it is increasingly difficult to keep a clear sight of the distinction between what is real and the simulation of reality proposed by the media (Beaudrillard, 1983). Children are not the only ones who are confused. Through my work educating adults, I have been surprised to discover how lost many feel, and their lack of clarity about boundaries of sexual behaviour. I have also witnessed their concern with harming children's freedom and development if they take an unpopular stance, and their fear of being rejected as old-fashioned.

Twenty-first century consumer capitalism promotes a hard to attain image of the ideal person; and the ideal woman, regardless of age, must nowadays look sexy, young, thin, etcetera. Young people are not immune to this, since consumerism is instrumentalized via the power of the media to influence youth culture through music, film, television, magazines, literature, fashion and other popular cultural means (Brown et al., 2006). Moreover, the pornography industry which has grown enormously in the past twenty years, is increasingly targeting younger audiences and appears to have taken on the role of defining, in a very narrow way, what sexuality is about and what it means to be a man and to be a woman (Marzano & Rozier, 2005; Poulin & Laprade, 2006). Since preadolescents aged 9 to 12 (tweens, as they have become popularly known) are

one of the most important demographic cohorts since the baby boomers, they are being targeted, rather aggressively, by a multitude of corporate interests (Quart, 2003; Schor, 2004).

On the one hand, twenty-first century North American corporate culture “seduces” girls via the media with offerings of glitter, popularity and fame through sexualized popular cultural icons, operating at the service of, and controlled by, powerful economic interests. On the other hand, girls are blamed for letting themselves be lured into dressing and/or acting in oversexualized ways. According to Kilbourne (2000), the media offer contradictory images to girls, asking them simultaneously to appear innocent and seductive, virginal and experienced. Parents and teachers tell them that those behaviours are inappropriate and the media warns the public about the decadence of children’s behaviour while promoting it at the same time. The experts fuel public debate, talking about dangers, constructing theories and arguing about meanings and interpretations. Girls are caught in the crossfire between competing *scripts*: “Be sexy! Popular girls are” and “Good girls don’t”.

For this reason, as Mitchell & Reid-Walsh (2002) have indicated, it is important to create a decolonizing space for researching children’s popular culture (a subject on which they are the experts) while remaining mindful of not taking at face value the voice of experience, which might serve to de-historicize and decontextualize what is being reported. People’s voices are not the events themselves but rather stories about the events (Fine, 1994), or as Alfred Korzybski termed it in 1931 “the map is not the territory”. According to King (2007), discourses based on children’s capacity for autonomous decision-making and social agency, which he defines as popular within the new

childhood sociology, might lead to poor sociological theorizing. If, as Jenkins (1998) has observed, we all have a great deal invested in seeing children as transparent without sexuality or political agency, isn't there also a risk on the opposite discourses of sexuality, autonomy and political agency, of legitimizing the perception of children as valid sexual objects and ultimately normalizing and gaining greater social acceptance for pedophilia?

Although I have had the opportunity to discuss these issues and know the extent of the concern expressed by many adults and young adults, a question that has bothered me for a long time is how the *actors* in this drama, preteen girls, feel about these issues and what do they have to say. In my work meeting informally with groups of children and young teens, I have observed that girls who dress sexy, don't like to talk about it. Why is this so? What constructs lurk behind this silence? How might we encourage them to talk about their motivation? What can we learn as adults and activists from engaging them in conversation? Are girls who dress sexy and/or engage in precocious sexual practices the only ones that are being sexualized? How do girls navigate the treacherous path between systemic pressures and personal agency? As I shall explain in more detail later on in this chapter, this thesis is intended to explore and address these kinds of questions.

People who are involved in children's lives are clamouring for guidelines and reference points concerning children, sexuality and the media. As a practitioner and adult educator, I hope to offer insights that can help people navigate these "troubled waters" and can serve as "a set of thinking tools" (Bourdieu, 1984). However, understanding these issues requires critical analysis, that we question the economic architecture behind the

phenomenon of precocious sexualization. Whose voices are being heard, whose are marginalized and why? Who is framing the debates and for whose benefit? What forms of violence lurk in the dark corners of this troublesome subject? The research that underlies this thesis will help us think about these questions in a more evidence-based way.

### **III. Purpose of this Research**

The purpose of this small-scale project is to investigate how preadolescent girls (9 to 12 years of age) voice their feelings about media messages promoting the adoption of sexual personas. A second and related purpose is to examine how a better understanding of girls' perspectives might inform community-based programs designed to raise critical media awareness and counteract the social pressures many girls experience to conform to hypersexualized images of girlhood. A third and more general purpose is to sensitize adults, contextualize the issues and help them understand the implications of what is taking place. The data gathered through this study provides access to the perspectives of preteen girls, which is particularly important to explore, because many preadolescent girls feel that nobody asks what they are thinking and feeling and that nobody listens or cares about what they think (McRobbie, 1991; Taylor McLean, Gilligan & Sullivan, 1995; van Roosmalen, 2000).

### **IV. Research Questions**

This study centres on the analysis of six interview sessions my research assistants and I conducted with three groups of girls aged 9 to 12, who form a representative sample of the diverse girls we usually work with at the YWCA; girls who are often marginalized due to a combination of factors involving low-income, race, linguistic minority status,

disability and others. The guiding research questions for this study are: How do preteen girls feel about being bombarded with sexualized media images? How do they make sense of those images? What mental constructs do they form around the concept of *sexiness*? How might these constructs influence them?

## **V. Relevance of this Research**

In the twenty-first century preteen girls living in the Western world, are caught up in a paradox of competing mental scripts. Girls' bodies are a key focus of this research because they are the very sites where much of the debate on sexualization is centred. For historian Joan Jacobs Brumberg (1998), "in the twentieth century, the body has become the central personal project of American girls" (p. 97). Understanding girls' constructs around the importance of sexy bodies is meaningful because *sexiness* appears to be highly desirable; a preferred vehicle for achieving popularity and influence, and *sexiness* involves practices affecting girls' bodies and their self-perception. Research into girls' perspective about bodies, the media and *sexiness* is relevant because girls' bodies risk becoming the focus of self-loathing and attempts at self-control through compulsive dieting and other forms of violence against the self. Girls' bodies are at the crux of identity struggles defined by appearance; of peer and media pressure to conform to certain ideals and standards of beauty; of imitation of popular culture icons. They are also the sites of important biological changes; of parents' and researchers' concerns; of various forms of domination; of class, race and patriarchal expectations and of capitalist lust for accumulation.

Chapter II will present some relevant theories, provide a critique of capitalism, consumer and popular culture and examine their influence on girls' relationships to their bodies.



## Chapter II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE AND OTHER RELEVANT CONCEPTS

All the world is a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players:  
They have their exits and their entrances;  
And one man in his time plays many parts.  
William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act 1 sc.7

This thesis seeks to explore and interpret how preadolescent girls conceive of the notion of *sexiness* and the impact this construct might have on their lives. As expressed in Chapter I, it is important to understand what girls feel and think about this issue because of societal concerns about certain phenomena, which I have labelled precocious sexualization.

In the previous chapter, I have provided an overview of why precocious sexualization is a problem and hinted at how this phenomenon situates itself within the needs created by consumer society. This chapter broadly examines some of the characteristics of the capitalist system in the twenty-first century and consumer society in relation to girls' bodies, as well as some theories that provide a relevant theoretical lens for interpretation of the findings.

#### **I. Theories about Systems**

##### ***1. Luhmann***

According to Luhmann (1990) "the system of society consists of communications. There are no other elements; there is no further substance but communications" (p.197). In Luhmann's general approach, society is not seen as consisting of individuals but of

communications, organized within societal systems. Since events are contingent, random and chaotic, it is only through these systems of communication that life can appear orderly, controllable and manageable. Some systems such as politics, law, science and economics are functional in organizing meaningful communications for society, and each have their own unique and non-replicable functions that determine the form and the nature of their communications. Society consists of the sum total of communicable meaning. What reality is cannot be observed directly. Systems construct their own version of reality through specific codes and programs, and according to their own myths and delusions. The perspective from within any system's boundaries is limited; it is only from the perspective of another system that the original system and its environment can be observed. However, this second order system cannot claim better access to objective reality than the first one. In Luhmann's view, there can be no all-knowing and all-perceiving system that is able to provide ultimate truths about the world.

In his article on the sociology of childhood, King (2007) examined -through Luhmann's theories- a wide range of conceptual frameworks that claim objective knowledge of children's lives. He proposed that psychoanalytic theory, children's rights groups, religious ideology and many other social theories simply attempt to gain societal acceptance for their communications by couching them in scientific discourses. I have turned to Luhmann's systems' theory for the purposes of interpretation because it provides a useful perspective on the cacophony of competing scripts, discourses, or systems of communication that participants in my study appeared to attempt to harmonize within themselves; a process which I have labelled Cultural Script Theory.

## ***2. Scripted Girlhood: Cultural Script Theory***

Transactional Analysis was a popular therapeutic approach in the early 1970's, developed by psychiatrist Eric Berne<sup>4</sup> who was disenchanted with psychoanalysis. Berne quickly fell in the regard of his own colleagues because some of the basic tenets of the approach he developed deeply threatened the establishment. Berne did not look at patients as having something wrong with them but rather he believed that external circumstances, rather than internal failures, were to blame for the inner pain and maladaptive behaviours in people. He believed that from infancy people learn certain *scripts* from their parents, which they continue to perform throughout their lives unless they are able to 'unlearn' them. He thought that people were born 'princes' and 'princesses' and that life circumstances turned them into frogs. It is not within the scope or interest of this thesis to explore Transactional Analysis; my intention is simply to recuperate the concept of *scripts*. Scripts that -in interpreting my research findings- I have come to believe emanate not from our parents but are being impressed and reinforced upon us (and upon our parents) through Culture. Through the lens of Luhmann's systems' theory, I propose that if each of the systems present in society at any given time have their own internal language, codes and scripts representing certain ideologies, values and norms; each system will be continuously and more or less successfully promoting its own scripts and competing with others for space and domination over people's minds. I have named the process I observed in girls of attempting to integrate all these scripts<sup>5</sup> into a coherent whole, Cultural Script Theory.

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<sup>4</sup> See Steiner, Claude (1974)

<sup>5</sup> See Goffman (1969). A script is a theatrical metaphor alluding to memorized texts written by others.

A further issue that deserves to be explored is whether social systems act independently from each other or wholly or partly overlap; a set of system theories analyzed from a feminist angle provides a plausible explanation.

### ***3. Transversality, Consubstantiality and Intersectionality***

Feminist sociology professor Francine Descarries (2007) graciously shared with me some of her own thinking on the intersection between feminism and systems theory.<sup>6</sup> She introduced me to three interrelated concepts she is exploring, which I will attempt to translate faithfully from the French. The first is the *transversality* of social reports; based on the work of Christine Delphy (1975) and Daune-Richard & Devreux (1992), which postulates that gender relations constitute a system with its own organizational logic that affects the entire social space; as well as a representation of the organizational practices of inequality around which society is organized and structured. The second notion is the *consubstantiality* of social reports, which postulates that humans never live or act under the influence of a unique social system of connections, but that the links are multiple and cohabit in non hierarchical ways, so no system determines the totality of the field it structures (Kergoat, 2001). It is, according to Kergoat, in their *consubstantiality*, their constant interaction, that social connections weave the tissue of society and impel its particular dynamic. The third and last concept, which originates in post-colonial feminism, is *intersectionality*, the way various systems of oppression function and sanction each other (Bilge, 2005).

Intersectional theory, according to Morris (2007), is useful in framing a complex view of reality and social inequality. Collins (1990) had conceptualized these interwoven

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<sup>6</sup>Personal communications during May and June 2007

patterns of inequality as a “matrix of domination”, where one is positioned according to advantages and disadvantages and may be privileged or not depending on their position within the continuum of equality and inequality. These system frameworks provide interesting insights into the lives of the girls who have participated in this research as they were all at a disadvantage due to their gender, class, socio-economic and linguistic minority status; as well as most of them, because of their race.

## **II. Women and the Body**

According to Bordo (1993), feminist discourse in the 1960’s and 1970’s viewed women’s bodies as a socially constructed and “colonized” territory, rather than a site of individual self-determination. The prevalent idea at the time was that women were wholly responsible for their enslavement since it was a manifestation of their own and true nature. Drawing on feminist practice, which was concerned with political and social change, feminist academics analyzed the issue of women’s heightened concern with their appearance with tools that had originated in structural traditions in sociology, such as Marxism. The paradigm of women’s obsession with their looks became defined as illustrative of their position as victims of the oppression of patriarchal capitalism (Chapkis, 1986; Frost, 2005). Popular feminism and sociology have thus been actively concerned with the impact of body dissatisfaction in women since the early 1970’s and there is a considerable corpus of sociological theorizing on ‘the body’, both as *Leib*, the living, experiential body and *Körper*, the objective, exterior, institutionalized body (Plessner, 1976 quoted in Turner, 1992). However, for Frost (2001), the current cynicism towards the form of theorizing that “leaves unproblematic the notion of coherent self, or meta narratives of power and oppression can lead to some productive analyses of

women and the body being ignored” (p.26). One of those narratives of power and oppression is offered by social constructionism.

### ***1. Social Constructionism***

According to Frost (2005), in the 1990’s and with the increased blurring of disciplinary boundaries, social constructionism came to enrich ‘corporeal feminism’ (Bordo, 1993; Malson, 1998). Social constructionism is a framework that strongly informs the analysis of my data. As Frost (2001) has indicated:

From within this strand of feminist theorizing, what women do and what they are, and indeed what they can be, is neither the expression of an essential autonomous or semi-autonomous subject, nor just a reflection of their direct oppression by the powerful forces of capitalist patriarchy, but is the product of the intersection of a number of powerful, historically and socially located, strands of thought/ groupings of belief. (p. 31)

Within this framework, girls’ experience and understanding of the importance of sexiness and of what it means to be a girl, is not only a subjective experience of identity but is also fuelled and circumscribed by external prescriptions. Cultural Script Theory, a derivative of social constructionism, attempts to describe the process of how girls attempt to integrate into some form of coherent self the competing discourses and prescriptions they have internalized; which discourses or scripts will hold sway at any given time will depend on a number of personal, familial and social factors, too numerous to examine extensively in the context of this thesis. What appears important to contextualize is what those prescriptions of girlhood are and where do they originate as well as their potential impact. In other words, what are some of the key ingredients in the *recipe* for constructing a girl? Frost (2001) has identified the following ingredients, others will be explored later: a) the category girl or woman is deviant, since the norm is male; b) a girl is her body; c) feminine sexuality is passive and defined by men; and d) females are

supposed to be slim and beautiful. However girls, as we will see in Chapter IV, engage in what we may call a *dance* with the variety of scripts and prescriptions in their lives; sometimes engaging, others questioning, accepting, critiquing and rebelling. In Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) this psychological functioning is seen as a continuous reciprocal interaction between personal and environmental determinants, where girls are neither wholly driven by inner forces nor by environmental stimuli. As girls observe other people's behaviours and the consequences for them, they experience vicariously and acquire integrated patterns of behaviour without having to develop them gradually by a tedious process of trial and error.

## ***2. Bodily Disciplines***

Bartky (1990) identified three practices that contribute to the construction of femininity: exercise and diet; attention to gestures, postures and movements destined to make women appear to be taking little space; and techniques that display the body as an ornamental surface. "Dieting disciplines the body's hungers: appetite must be monitored at all times and governed by an iron will. Since the innocent need of the organism for food will not be denied, the body becomes one's enemy, an alien being intent on thwarting the disciplinary project" (p. 66). However, well-being requires the individual's control over the mind-body relationship, the capacity to monitor and interpret the body's messages and the ability to mobilize the body in response to those messages. The self-denial of bodily appetites that occurs in constant dieting and in eating disorders appears to lead women towards a lack of awareness of internal cues and diminished well-being.

Feeling disempowered on a regular basis might also affect the neuro-hormonal system and the ability to achieve well-being. Constantly interrupting the natural emotions

and responses to bodily signals is damaging to one's health because social circumstances are capable of creating biochemical changes in the body and cause depression. Our social and economic position in society, as well as the level of stress a person experiences, will thus impinge on bodily well-being (Freund, 1983). When people experience a deficit of power and control over their lives, they feel stressed since power and control act as *status shields*, protecting people against attacks on their self-esteem. Moreover, constant catering to the needs of others while denying and relinquishing one's own needs, which is often expected of women, also appears to be deeply harmful (Hochschild, 1983). We can then see that if we consider women as having –a priori- a subordinate role in society in comparison to men, for those who are marginalized by other factors such as class, race, age, sexual orientation, minority status, disability, etc.; the layers of oppression multiply.

Although women should not be seen as victims or dupes, they are caught up in a process that Lovell (2000) has defined as normalization and homogenization. The female body is self-perceived as deficient and in constant need of self-transformation (Davis, 1995). But who is the disciplinarian? For Bartky (1990), there are two aspects to feminine bodily discipline, the first one is socially imposed and the second one is voluntary. This process is conceptualized in two ways: in the first, the feminine ideal is so deeply internalized that women lack the critical distance to contest it and are fearful of the consequences of non-compliance. In the second one, since these ideals are so powerful, rejecting the supporting practices amounts to rejecting one's own identity. Bordo (1993) speaks of normative feminine practices, which train women's bodies into docility and obedience to prevalent cultural demands *while being experienced as control and power*.



### 3. *Girl Power*

Foucault (1980) conceptualized modern power as non-authoritarian, non-orchestrated and non-conspiratorial, although still capable of producing docile bodies and of normalizing prevailing relationships of subordination and dominance. In his view, power was not something that people have but rather a dynamic network of non-centralized forces, originating in different places and acting through multiple processes. Bordo (1993) argued that this unfocused conception of power does not mean that there are no dominant positions, social structures or ideologies; forces that have a significant influence on girls' lives. Foucault's conception of power is also problematic since as the power of the media continues to concentrate within very few hands, it can be argued that some individuals can exercise exceptional amounts of power.

Pipher (1994) was successful in bringing attention to the importance of paying attention to what is happening to girls, but she portrayed them primarily as victims of society, vulnerable and in crisis, at risk of harming themselves and developing antisocial behaviours. According to Aapola, Gonick & Harris (2005), feminist debates following her work have focused on highlighting the ways girls continuously contest and modify their subject positions, favouring girl-power discourses. The "Riot Grrrl" movement of the early 1990's, was significant in promoting a take charge discourse that sought to transform the vulnerability, sweet naturedness, voicelessness and passivity associated with girls, particularly in certain classed and racialized conceptions of girlhood, into '*girl-power*'. This was celebrated by some as expanding the idea of femininity by embracing self-expression through attitude, fashion and Do It Yourself (DIY) cultural

production, particularly in the form of zines (hand-made, cut and paste magazines); and critiqued by others who identified in its formulation neoliberal ideals of individualism.

The original Riot Grrrls were highly politicized and proposed to young women alternative forms of embodiment that accounted for individual experiences of sexuality, race and class. However, and as it is often the case in consumer society, where cultural values are ransacked to produce desired effects, the idea of girl power was co-opted; the disruptive nature of this “girl-style revolution” was ignored and media attention focused instead on Grrrls clothing and appearance, a far more marketable and profitable endeavour. Popular culture appropriated the girl-power motto in myriad ways but it was primarily the all-girl pop British group “The Spice Girls”, which reached a peak in 1997 and dissolved shortly thereafter, who popularized it the most. Contrary to the Riot Grrrls, the Spice Girls’: “I have attitude, I am sexy but cuddly and safe” message took over the popular imagination and was a huge commercial success. That particular definition of girl power is the mould that has shaped and continues to shape the making of female pop artists to this date and pervades the imagination of young girls. This is illustrated by the recent welcomed reunion of the Spice Girls.

Many feminist authors wish to highlight, as Jiwani, Steenbergen & Mitchell (2006) did, that “childhood is always a gendered, raced, sexed and classed space, inscribed by particular behavioural dictates, social norms and mores and ways of seeing the world. It is also context-bound, rooted in language and the politics of location” (p. x). However, by focusing on what makes girls different from each other, the power of the larger social, political and economic forces that shape those experiences risks becoming dimmed and blurred. Bordo (1993) has affirmed that both perspectives are important in

providing a complete theoretical understanding of power in relation to women's bodies. The question is: can both perspectives be integrated, as some authors hope? If so how? And if not, which of these two perspectives provides a greater insight into the specific historical situation of the girls who are the subject of this thesis?

Long before Foucault concerned himself with the idea that bodies were shaped by power struggles, Mary Wollstonecraft wrote in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792): "Genteel women are, literally speaking, slaves to their bodies, and glory in their subjection (...) Taught from infancy that beauty is woman's sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body and, roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison" (quoted in Bordo 1999, p. 249). Women are still trapped today in this narcissistic world of ongoing self-policing and surveillance; however, the ideal of what they *should* look like, of what constitutes femininity, is not subject to individual interpretation but prescribed by mass standards (Featherstone, 1991). These mass standards are the product of capitalism and the ideology of consumerism; two systems that merit further exploration.

### **III. Capitalism's Influence on Bodies**

#### ***1. The Capitalist System in the Twenty-First Century***

According to Comaroff & Comaroff (2001), as capitalism has overpowered other economic paradigms, the relationship between production and consumption and labor and capital, has radically changed. Although capitalism represents itself as a "gospel of salvation", fully capable of transforming the world of the disempowered and marginalized, in reality it has given birth to new patterns of exclusion affecting race, sexuality, gender and class in ways that are both familiar and new, patterns of exclusion that have important impact on the marginalized girls we work with.

As production has moved to the global South, economic value is increasingly being generated by control over the provision of services, communications and finance capital. Gambling and speculation, which used to be considered immoral practices in Protestant and other religious ethics, have now been routinized through various discourses and cultural practices that also inculcate the supreme rationality of the capitalist system and the need for political conformity. While the rich and the powerful gamble with junk bonds or corporate theft, for the poor, gambling and risk-taking appear to offer one of the few available pathways out of poverty. This can be seen in poor communities' gambling in lotteries and video terminals, as well as in the increased worldwide migration towards very uncertain futures. Increased gambling is fuelled by the notion that only through *magic* and chance it is possible to change one's situation. For ordinary people, the increased dislocation and loss of community and human dignity that have been created by a globalized world; and the commoditization of culture, history and bodies which is aggravated by the destabilization of labour, have led to what Comaroff & Comaroff (2001) have called a *magic of despair* that has existed before in history, but is currently being intensified at a frightening rate. For many young girls, this *magic of despair* appears to translate into dreams of stardom, an apparently guaranteed pathway towards success.

## **2. *Simulacra and the Media***

We live in a world of simulation or *simulacra*, a fiction created by Hollywood to promote an ideology where capitalism is not only inevitable but also a supremely rational social and economic system; to convince people that radical change is not only undesirable but also impossible. The cultural industries of mass media and entertainment,

which have become highly relevant in post World War II capitalism, circulate cultural commodities and manipulate people's consciousness (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972). In *fast capitalism*, Agger (2006) said, everything becomes advertisement and is so cloaked in illusions that it is difficult to view it critically. He saw television as compensating for the 'reality' that we do not get in the real world, narcotizing people as it leaves them empty and thirsting to buy products to fill this emptiness. The mass media have not only replaced traditional sources of meaning but have also done so in unprecedented ways. Their messages encourage us to buy, to search for value and meaning in our lives through shopping: "The social spaces and cultural labels of shopping offer us hope of achieving the American Dream: Low prices define our conception of democracy. Brand names represent our search for a better life. Designer boutiques embody the promise of an ever-improving self" (Zukin, 2005, p. 8). It is here, within these notions, that we form our ideas about a perfect society and the importance of creating a *perfect self*.

### ***3. The Quest for the Perfect Self***

The quest for the perfect self, and the constant mass-media bombardment about what that perfect self should look like, lurks behind women's dissatisfaction with their bodies and their looks. This dissatisfaction drives the economy and marginalizes those who can't afford to shop. However, consumption is less about acquisition than about producing desires. "As the body sees the object it immediately aligns itself in some fit with that object; its desire is to make the object part of its image of itself. Thus the object becomes a mirror in which the body sees itself reflected, but only on its own terms" (Frank, 1995 p. 62).

According to Featherstone (1991), the vast range of body maintenance and improvement products flooding the market demonstrates the significance of body preservation and appearance in late capitalist society. The upkeep of the body is represented as not only important to one's health but also as a vehicle of pleasure and self-expression. The beauty and the open sexuality associated with representations of pleasure, hedonism and display, emphasize the importance of achieving a particular look. In current consumer culture, discipline and hedonism, which used to be opposite concepts, are no longer incompatible. Now we need discipline in order to produce perfect bodies ready to engage in hedonist practices.

#### ***4. The Rise of Consumerism***

Consumerism, an ideology that has been strongly cultivated in Western societies since the 1950's, can be seen as an adaptation of the capitalist system to changing circumstances; today it has become the prime mover of the economy, the factor that determines value, constructs identities and shapes the world. Consumerism has become the "invisible hand, or the Gucci-gloved fist, that animates the political impulses, the material imperatives, and the social forms (...) of capitalism in its neoliberal, global manifestations" (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2001, p.4).

In a society where consumption drives the economy, shopping has become the main strategy for creating value as we all long for "a virtuous ideal of value that we no longer get from religion, work or politics". Shopping defines who we are as individuals and what we want to become as a society. Since shopping is a normal activity, we accept as natural the idea that humans exist to buy and sell: "shopping teaches us how to live in a market society" (Zukin, 2005, p.8). However, considering the natural limitations of our

planet and the lack of purchasing power of most people in non-Western societies, how do marketers create new consumers *within* Western societies? As we will examine in greater depth later on in this chapter, they do so by targeting children and, according to Schor (2004), this marketing is fundamentally changing the experience of childhood. Schor believes that the U.S. places a higher priority on teaching its children how to be consumers than how to thrive intellectually, socially or spiritually; and proclaims that corporations have infiltrated all the institutions and core activities of childhood without resistance from parents or governments.

The ideology of *consumerism* emerged in the 1920's, not as progression from earlier modes of consumption but through aggressive campaigns that required making people emotionally vulnerable to their appearance, in need of monitoring themselves and intolerant of their own imperfections. However, consumer society actually developed a lot earlier in history since, with the blossoming of capitalism during the Industrial Revolution; a need emerged to create consumers and markets for the products that could now be mass-produced.

Consumerism has been particularly dominant since World War II, when post-war Western economies developed a new culture demanding young, beautiful and fit bodies that could be displayed without shame. Since marketers found that words were too abstract to convey these new concepts, visual images portraying demeanour, clothing and gestures became the way to prescribe what was to be desired by consumers (Kern, 1975). Hollywood stars provided the inspiration for the masses on how to look. By the late 1970's slimness and fitness had become highly saleable commodities, associated not only with feeling and looking good but also with personal worth. The overweight became

worthless, portrayed as outcasts who have survived another era and the object of jokes (Featherstone, 1991); a perception that, as we will see on Chapter IV, a few of the girls in this study were well aware of. In consumer society, fat is unacceptable and therefore particularly stigmatized as deviant (Bartky, 1990). Beyond concerns about health, this fear of body-fat fuels today a multibillion-dollar business and profoundly influences girls and women's self-perception.

Society and consumerism, aided by other social systems such as patriarchy and racism, shape the experience of women's embodiment through domination. The principal vehicle for the ideology of consumerism is the media, which proposes certain ideals and stereotypes that have been deemed to be effective in promoting dissatisfaction with one's body as well as a state of confusion, a blurring of the lines between fantasy and reality, which encourages people to reassure themselves through shopping and might also serve to narcotize them against any ideas of becoming agents for social change. The focus on consumption as an essential provider of value and for the promotion of a certain heteronormative ideal of beauty, excludes those such as racialized girls and others who do not fit the ideal as well as those who are marginalized for economic reasons. The proposed ideal of the perfect self is not only unreal and unattainable but also unsustainable. According to Agger (2006), a characteristic of civilization is that "domination proceeds according to discourses and practices that construct others as less valuable than members of the dominant center (who control the discourses of value)" (p.50). This appears to define the racialized, classed girl's position in contemporary consumer society.



Most girls and women who have internalized this process of objectification are afflicted in their self-image and self-esteem; this has a number of consequences for their psychological and physiological well-being. Since this illusory perfect self also needs to be *sexy*, consumerism combines with all the factors that have been mentioned above and even appears to conspire with environmental and biological processes to advance puberty and create additional conditions for girls to be sexualized prematurely.

### ***5. The Performing Body***

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (1969) used theatrical metaphors such as “scripts”, “role-playing”, “audiences” and “performances”. Goffman’s work starting in the late 1950’s focused not only on the Body situated where self and society intersect but also on the self as performance. Goffman believed that producing one’s appearance was neither an optional activity nor something people were forced into. Within this perspective, girls can be seen as both the products and the producers of social meaning, actively engaged in an interactive social process that will shape their identity. Much of the late modern feminist writing about girls has been influenced by Goffman’s views and some of his ideas about gender as performance are compelling. The problem with his perspective is that if the construction of appearance is simply both an intrinsic and unavoidable part of identity formation, it should not be the source of so much grief and discontent. Perhaps since Goffman’s writing, as Frost (2001) has suggested, the growth of consumer capitalism has had an important hand to play in fostering an increased obsession with appearance:

Appearance obsessed, image-obsessed and self-obsessed, the socially produced subject of late consumer capitalism attempts to exercise control over existence in the context of large, rapidly moving unknowable forces of, for example,

globalization, by an over-emphasis on control in the personal sphere (Frost, 2005 p. 67; drawing on Lasch, 1979).

Frost (2001) has also proposed a critical view of Giddens' (1971) proposal that the body is in perpetual self-creation in modern social life, which he believed to extend beyond fashion and commodification through the media. This process was seen as one of self-reflective identity construction in which people continuously remake themselves in view of the best available versions of perfection; a process that generates high anxiety about aspects of the self, such as ageing or weight gain, which might interfere with perfection as the goal people feel the need to work at. In a high-risk society, self-control becomes a way of coping and self-criticism and insecurity become the by-products. However, Giddens' framework fails to acknowledge that the versions of identity and lifestyle that are proposed to consumers for emulation purposes are not limitless, as they might appear to be, but rather hegemonic. Girls do not have endless possibilities for free choice and a diverse array of valued styles to choose from. The beauty imperative according to Frost (2001) is young, slim, fit, and fashionable; I will add that it also needs to look sexy and is mostly constituted as Caucasian. This *one size fits all* approach actually fits a restricted number of people and is mostly an illusion; and those who can afford the cost of pursuing the consumer ideal of perfection are part of the elite, the others are bound to feel excluded, shamed and stigmatized. Dissatisfaction with the appearance of the self is the driving force of consumer capitalism.

#### **6. *Constructing the Tween***

What is a tween? For Mitchell & Reid-Walsh (2005), a tween is a present day construction of preadolescent girls defined by a commodity culture. Toy marketers resurfaced this 1960's concept in the 1980's, when the top age for girls for buying toys

dropped from 12 to 8 years of age. The industry reacted by creating jewellery craft kits, diva dolls, makeup and other items to encourage girls to identify with issues and products that used to be marketed to older girls. Ingenious marketing strategies combined innocence and edge and promoted sexy but childlike teenage stars and romantic princess themes. As a consequence, current marketing strategies are encouraging preteen girls to behave and dress like teen girls; as they seek to define their identity, they are being inculcated with a central idea: that identity and image are the same thing.

At a time when daughters could be developing skills, talents, and interests that will serve them well their whole life, they are being enticed into a dream of specialness through pop-stardom and sexual objectivity that will derail other opportunities (Lamb & Brown, 2006, p. 6).

The contemporary *tween* cannot be understood independently of its inception and articulation as a consumer within the market demands of capitalism. And the Tween is mostly a girl, because the construction of femininity requires accessories, make-up, clothes and shoes, which constitute “predictable economic stuff” (Phillips, 1999).

*Boys and girls: too old too soon*, proclaims a headline in a magazine article; a group of white 11 and 12-year-old girls are portrayed getting their hair done, wearing make-up and making out with boys on their bedroom floors. Except, this now familiar scene appeared, according to Cook & Kaiser (2004), in *Life magazine* in 1962 (August 10 1962, p. 58-65) with the subheading: America’s Subteens Rushing Toward Trouble. Cook & Kaiser have proposed that the *subteen* subject was constituted as female, white, middle class and heterosexual. The subteen was the predecessor of the tween but the concept did not catch the public’s imagination at the time the way it has now.

In his book on the Commodification of Childhood, Cook (2004) explained how the *teen* consumer emerged through marketing strategies. As World War II was ending

and a demographic boom was taking place, marketers started analyzing very carefully the characteristics of the age group and luring girls into places and styles created just for them. In a dynamic interplay between girls' fashion consciousness and insecurities and the marketers' needs for developing new markets, the teenage consumer market grew. It flourished because by paying attention, marketers figured out that girls needed to be treated like persons in their own right and their agency recognized. Specialized clothing and trained sales clerks were made available and a *lifestyle* was also proposed, as spaces were decorated according to girls' tastes, jukeboxes appeared on sales floors and popular music was streamed in. In some stores, cross marketing was promoted by having Coca-Cola parties (Coke Sesh) where girls modeled the latest fashions for each other as they drank soft drinks. The target of this flurry of activity was, rather obviously, the upper middle class white girl. The still popular magazine *Seventeen* was first published at this time.

In the early 1960's and for the same demographic reasons, the concept of the *subteen* was constructed as a commercial *persona*.

Here is a very telling description of this new *persona* from a merchandise manager in 1959:

She spends as much as she can possibly beg, borrow or steal from her dazed parents. She loves to shop. All we need to do is expose this Newteen to the things she likes, and she is on our team –selling herself, her mother, and her pals. (...) Our customer needs a feeling of security, of close friendships with contemporaries. She idolizes the age group just above her and does not want to be confused with "those infants", who is anyone just a year younger or a grade behind her (Anonymous, quoted in Cook, p. 139-140).

Preteen girls were portrayed at the time as wanting to be older, yet still immature and malleable. As manufacturers started offering them more sophisticated clothing and

accessories, anxious to keep them buying, some age slippage occurred between teens and preteens and concerns arose. Much like today, people argued whether it was *cute* to see them pretending to be older and about the risks of allowing them to dress and be portrayed in sexualized ways. According to Cook, nobody blamed the manufacturers; much like today<sup>7</sup> the textual blame was placed on parents. It is interesting to note that this sexualized perception of preteen girls coincided with two popular cultural events that made waves at the time: Vladimir Nabokov published *Lolita* in 1955 and Stanley Kubrick's film based on the book was aired in 1962. The idea of the seductive nymphet was very much part of the popular imagination of the time and -it could be argued- still persists today.

According to Schor (2004), contemporary American teens and tweens constitute the most consumer-involved, brand-oriented and materialistic generation in history; she cites an unnamed survey of youth that has found 75 percent of U.S. *tweens* want to be rich and 61 percent want to be famous. She suggests we should avoid romantic notions of childhood; children, once considered expendable, have been since the early part of the twentieth century thought of as priceless, sacred and irreplaceable. However, real flesh children are complex beings, with conflicting impulses and desires. She sees the extent of children's immersion in consumer culture as being unprecedented, and marketers and children as joining forces in convincing adults to spend.

A number of factors, including broad social changes, have influenced consumer culture, but for Schor (2004) there is a new *war* on children, exemplified by the industry's language: children are *targets*, printed materials are *collateral*; campaigns use *viral marketing* and *guerrilla* strategies; and impromptu interviews with consumers are

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<sup>7</sup> A comment based on professional experience.

called *intercepts*. In 2004, the total marketing and advertising expenditures directed at children were calculated at \$15 billion U.S. dollars. James McNeal, who Schor calls the most prominent estimator of U.S. markets, has declared that children aged four to twelve have directly influenced \$330 billion and *evoked* another \$340 billion of adult purchases in 2004. Finally, in 2002 the total global influence of the tween market was estimated at \$1 *trillion*.

For these reasons, it is easy to see why *tween* and teenage consumers are encouraged to seek their own distinctive styles. Studies about girl magazines and their readers, Bouchard & Bouchard's (2003) among others, show that girls are being proposed two or three styles to individualize through accessories; an illusion of *choice* within a very narrow range. Being a girl today seems defined by shopping and style, and is synonymous with appearance and the body. In some recent studies (Frosh, Phoenix & Pattman, 2002; Frost, 2001) identity, self-image, consumerism and group behaviour are being symbiotically linked. Acceptance into group identity appears to be dependant on the image the young person is capable of constructing. In Frost's interviews with young women, class and poverty were directly linked to popularity and unpopularity, group membership or group exclusion. The ability to reproduce a visual identity that fits with the mass-produced images and ideals of consumer society and the specific styles adopted by particular sub-groups or localities, appears dependent on cultural capital and guided "by continual anxious self-appraisal" (Frost, p. 77).

According to Harris (2005), Walkerdine's (1997) work suggests that the *tween* phenomenon is an extension of the sexualization of working class girls to preteens from other social classes. Through popular culture, the "coquettish little working class girl" has

been inviting the eroticizing gaze for a long time. In a world of few opportunities, the dream of achieving celebrity through stardom might be one of the few ways to envisage a successful future. According to Walkerdine (1997), the white middle class girl knows that many opportunities are available to her. She does not need to fantasize about being *somebody*, since she is told that she already is. However, I agree with Harris as she proposes that for middle class white girls living in the uncertain economics of late modernity, there are no assured pathways to a secured adult life any more. Today, celebrity has been made to look so appealing and so accessible through the right look that all girls are encouraged to self-invent through glamour and sexualized femininity in order to become somebody. If this is the only space of power available to girls, many will want to take it, since participating in conventional femininity can be constraining but also pleasurable.

#### **IV. Examining Embodiment:**

##### ***1. Body Image and Body Schema***

The issue of embodiment is an essential piece of the puzzle if we are to understand preteen girls; but embodiment is not only a social process but a biological and psychological one as well. Gallagher (2005) makes a distinction between body schema and body image and proposes that body image, a mental construct or representation, has a minimum of three aspects: a) the subject's perceptual experience of her body; b) the subject's conceptual understanding of the body in general; and c) the subject's emotional attitude toward her body. The body schema, described as a non conscious postural model which actively monitors movement and posture, can neither be reduced to body image, an intentional object of consciousness, nor to neurological functioning. The body schema is

at play; for example, as we are actively engaged in a conversation while taking a stroll yet unconsciously lower our heads in order to avoid hitting a low tree-branch. Body image, manifested as a representation or as a set of beliefs about the body or body parts is not a veridical representation of the body, whereas body schema operates in a unified way.

The difference between body image and body schema is interesting to note in this thesis because of the potential impact on the work we do with girls. What are the implications for practice? Various studies (Adame et al., 1991; Dasch, 1978; Davis & Cowles, 1991; Skrinar et al., 1986) have shown that dance, exercise and other practices that affect postural schema: balance, coordination, strength and mobility, improved the subjects' perception of body competence and satisfaction with their bodies. Other studies (Ruggieri et al., 1983; Sabatini, Ruggieri & Milizia, 1984) have proposed that changes in muscle tone, interpreted as a sign of preparedness for external response, increased the subject's perception of the environment and decreased perception of the self. For a number of years, girls' programs at the YWCA have included a workshop for half of the allotted time and physical activity in the form of dance or kick-box for the other half. Gallagher's proposal of physical exercise as a way of transforming body schema and body image is very significant for us.

## ***2. The Contribution of Biological Processes***

According to Sharpe (2003), in the past 200 years the timing of physical maturity has progressively declined but physical and biological development has not occurred at the same pace as cognitive and psychosocial development (Berger, 1998). Early adolescence begins with physical maturation, which usually takes place between the ages



of 10 and 13 years (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2002). Body weight plays a crucial role in the onset of menstruation, which usually starts when a girl has enough body fat (usually 17% of body fat) or a weight of 105 lbs, which are necessary to support pregnancy. In 1997, Hermann-Giddens et al. (2004) published the results of a major study of 17,077 girls aged 3-10 across the United States, which was done in collaboration with the American Academy of Pediatrics. The results of the study showed that for Caucasian girls, the mean age of the onset of puberty was 9.96 years but for African American girls it was 8.87 years. At every age, African American girls in the study were more advanced in puberty than Caucasian girls and African American girls were also found to be taller and heavier. Seaton (2005) has noted that the onset of puberty (breast and pubic hair development) does not necessarily translate into earlier onset of menstruation but rather that these girls progress through the stages more slowly.

Puberty for girls is a very significant event since various studies such as James (1993) have shown that bodies (size, shape and other visible traits) are very important to children in the creation of a sense of self and identity. Physical characteristics are crucial markers of social distinction and a changing body will affect a girl's perception of herself as well as the perception others have of her. Since the body stores oestrogen in fat, the significant weight gain that often accompanies puberty (Attie & Brooks-Gunn, 1989) will influence this perception. Also, the appearance of body hair, which also happens during this process, runs counter the current body aesthetic (Poulin & Laprade, 2006). Weight gain and body hair are thus two factors that may serve to increase girls' feelings of anxiety about their bodies.

Moreover, as a girl's body matures, sexual harassment appears to increase; so for example a Black seven-year-old whose breasts are budding will be exposed to a variety of unwelcome sexual comments and attention at a time when she does not have the maturity to cope with it. This is not exclusive to the western world; a BBC article about Cameroon<sup>8</sup> shows how some mothers resort to 'breast ironing', the placement of hot and heavy rocks on budding breasts, in a futile attempt to delay the physical development of breasts, a development that might result in unwanted sexual attention.

According to Sharpe (2003), in this period there is a sudden upsurge in gonad-releasing hormones, causing the gonads to increase production of oestrogen and testosterone in both sexes, which result in increased children's curiosity about their bodies and the bodies of others. In both these stages, sexual behaviour is usually non-coital (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2002). Although young teenagers might appear sexually mature at this time, they still have immature columnar cells lining their vaginas and cervixes, which render them more susceptible to sexually transmitted infections (STI's), especially herpes simplex and the HPV virus that has been linked to cervical cancer. Periods also tend to be irregular in the first few years, which make fertility unpredictable. Non-coital sexual behaviour characteristic of this age group often involves oral sex, and research at University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas in 2005 has shown that the lining of the throat is very permeable to viruses. Researchers found that lymphoid tissues (around the head and neck) and soft tissues in the mouth, oesophagus and tonsils were rapidly infected with the virus. These points of viral entry allow for rapid spread of the disease to other parts of the body.

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<sup>8</sup> Sa'ah, Randy (June 23, 2006). Cameroon girls battle « breast ironing ». BBC News. Retrieved on July 9, 2007 from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/5107360.stm>

### ***3. The Contribution of Environmental Processes***

Various theories attempt to answer the question of why biological changes taking place now, Herman-Giddens et al. (1997) were unable to offer an explanation for the maturing discrepancy between African American and Caucasian girls. Some popular theories tie early maturation to environmental factors such as growth hormones that become available through the food chain in dairy products and poultry; as well as other chemical messengers readily available in the physical environment which travel through the blood stream mimicking the body's natural hormones and regulating body functions. The Environmental Protection Agency has, according to Seaton (2005), identified more than 50 chemicals commonly available in everyday ingredients as hormone disruptors. Research published by Tiwary in 1994 found that chemicals in hair straightening products, popular with Black women, contain endocrine disruptors. Lighter skin is not only considered more valuable in society in general but within the black community itself, where lighter skin has been linked to status and beauty. Brumberg (1998) has proposed that African American girls appear to have more problems with dry skin and scalp than Caucasian girls of the same age; their use of oily products inflame the pores and increase acne that provokes dark scarring because of the amount of melanin in their skins. Although Black girls do not bleach their faces today to the same extent some did in the past, they still do use bleach products to hide dark scarring.

### ***4. The Contribution of Developmental Processes***

According to Esmond (2000) the period of early adolescence is a time of "storm and stress", critical because of the young person's struggle to form her personal identity and create a place in society for herself. As young individuals struggle towards personal

autonomy, relationships with those who hold authority can become a source of conflict and strain and sexual acting out might be part of this process. For Alexander (2001), Erikson's (1968) developmental model is effective in describing the cognitive development of adolescents. This model describes four tasks that adolescents master in the process of becoming adults: 1) movement toward separation from family and towards individualism; 2) development of mature social relationships with the same and opposite genders; 3) the preparation for career and occupational self identity; 4) the development and integration of a value system, which might be similar or different from that of the family of origin. In this view, progressing and struggling toward the mastery of these tasks helps explain risk-taking behaviour in young people, even those who might have never previously engaged in unhealthy behaviours. For example, in a young girl's decision to have sex with the sexually promiscuous football star, the desire to be accepted by her peers in the immediate, might override any consideration for a distantly perceived risk such as AIDS.

Esmond (2000) has proposed that the adolescent's increased capacity to focus on the self may result in egocentrism and the belief that one is above the worlds' risks and demands. Adolescents might also see sexual activity as a justifiable new experience, a sign of maturity, a form of peer-group conformity, a challenge to authority or an escape from the pressures of life (Neistein & Anderson, 2002). In preadolescence, children are seen as collecting information, morals and myths about sexuality from friends and family as the development of a greater self-understanding becomes complicated by rising feelings of self-doubt. Early adolescents are concrete thinkers and might lack, in certain cases, the ability to think abstractly about the future. This might lead to poor decision-

making about sex since what a partner thinks of them can become more important than the long-term outcomes of sex (Kuhn et al., 1988). Research has shown that during this period young girls are much more likely to experience sexual coercion. A study by Abma, Driscoll, & Moore (1998) found that 22% of females surveyed who had their first sexual encounter before the age of 15, stated that intercourse was not voluntary. A study by the Kaiser Family Foundation and YM magazine in 1996 found that teenagers often struggle with complex situations around sexuality involving drinking, drugs and peer pressure; when girls are not ready for sex they may use drugs and alcohol as a way of numbing themselves.

## ***5. The Contribution of the Media:***

### ***5.1 Objectification and Shame***

Objectification theory proposes that “girls and women are typically acculturated to internalize an observer’s perspective as a primary view of their physical selves” (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, p.173). This leads to ongoing body monitoring and self-objectification, which in turn creates opportunities for shame and anxiety and diminishes awareness of internal bodily cues and opportunities for peak motivational states. This theory does not look at the causes of this phenomenon; the authors simply attempt to shed light on the consequences it might have on girls and women’s lives.

In order to examine the consequences for girls, we need to go back to the thread and ideas proposed in the section about the pursuit of the perfect self. Goffman (1979) described how the discrepancy between virtual and actual social identity produces shame; and shame becomes so generalized that it taints the whole person. A dislike of one’s body, or even parts of one’s body, appears to produce in girls and women internal

feelings of shame that cease to be about that part of the body and become about the person in her totality, a failure to pass, an identity issue which grows to involve self-hatred (APA, 2007).

## ***5.2 Cultivation Theory and Popular Music***

The impact of the media on young people has been measured in a number of studies through *cultivation theory* (Gerbner et al., 1994), which argues that consistent exposure to themes over time, leads people to adopt the proposed perspectives about reality. There are a number of socialization factors that influence girls since the media are a delivery system of already existing cultural values as well as a means of creating and strengthening them, a process that is fuelled by consumerism (APA, 2007). One of the most important vehicles for sexualizing girls, according to a number of studies, is music videos, a medium highly popular with young girls. In music videos women are usually presented in an objectified, decorative manner while wearing revealing and provocative clothing and dancing in sexualized ways. Ward & Rivadeneyra (2002) found that most music videos contained sexual imagery and objectified women but that it was particularly true of music videos shown on Black Entertainment Television (84 %). As we will see in Chapter IV, this information is key in understanding how Black girls in our study were torn between racial pride about hip-hop music (Clay, 2003), while being simultaneously repelled by the overt sexuality of the imagery.

The next Chapter explains the project design, the characteristics of the groups and provides background information on the chosen methodology.

## **Chapter III**

### **DESIGNING, CONTEXTUALIZING AND CONDUCTING THE STUDY**

#### **I. Research Goals Restated**

By exploring what “sexy” means to preadolescent girls, the goal of this study is to investigate how preadolescent girls voice their feelings about media messages promoting the adoption of sexual personas. A second and related purpose is to examine how a better understanding of girls’ perspectives might inform community-based programs designed to raise critical media awareness and counteract the social pressures many girls experience to conform to hypersexualized images of girlhood. A third and more general purpose is to sensitize adults, contextualize the issues and help them understand the implications of what is taking place. The data gathered through this study provides access to the perspectives of three groups of preadolescent girls who form a representative sample of the marginalized girls we usually work with at the Montreal YWCA. The meaning of the participants’ experiences and constructs around the notion of sexiness will be analyzed and situated contextually. Some of the variables that might influence this process and its potential impact will be explored.

#### **II. Context for the Study**

##### ***1. Professional Interest and Community Engagement***

As explained in Chapter I, I have been working at the YWCA Montreal since 2004 as coordinator of an action research project seeking to understand precocious sexualization and its impact on girls. Since 2006, I also manage a number of programs whose goal is to encourage the development of personal and social leadership in girls and women. Our girls’ programs address diverse issues specific to girls through workshops

that balance self-esteem building, personal development and a critical understanding of stereotypes, socialization, violence and inequality. This research is consequently framed by and informed by my work at the YWCA.

## ***2. Choice of Population: Why this Age Group Now?***

As explored in Chapter I, in recent years, Quebec and other Western societies have seen a rising concern about preadolescent girls showing signs of precocious sexualization and many parents, researchers and others working with children are concerned with the impact this phenomenon seems to be having on young girls' well-being. If girls effectively bathe in a mainstream culture that sells them a stereotypical and sexualized feminine ideal at a critical time of identity formation, an important question that needs to be answered is how preadolescent girls feel about it all and what do they have to say. This is particularly important because at this transitional phase in life, many girls feel that nobody asks, listens or cares about what they think (McRobbie, 1991; Taylor McLean, Gilligan & Sullivan, 1995; van Roosmalen, 2000).

## ***3. Research Questions***

For all of the reasons cited above, and to better inform the community work I do with girls, I decided to undertake a small-scale qualitative research study to explore their views on the media, sexuality, and gender roles. The study centres on six interview sessions my research assistants and I conducted with three groups of girls aged 9 to 12, who form a representative sample of the marginalized girls we usually work with at the YWCA. The guiding research questions for this study are: How do preteen girls feel about being bombarded with sexualized media images? How do they make sense of those



images? What mental constructs do they form around the concept of *sexiness*? How might these constructs influence them?

### **III. Research Methodology: Theory and Models**

In order to understand how girls create subjective meanings, a study was designed to elicit girls' responses to certain media images and to provide windows into their thinking around the concept of "sexy". Qualitative research design can facilitate the development of inductive theory from emerging themes identified from participants' responses. The methods chosen for this study are drawn from action research models to allow for participants' voices to be heard and offer an opportunity for unanticipated influences and phenomena to emerge. The participants' perspective constitutes the basis or grounding for the generation of theories and hypotheses. These theories and hypotheses can then be used to develop new intervention programs and strategies. The analysis of this study will be used to inform existing girls' programs as well as a new program that the YWCA Montreal is developing in an effort to mitigate media influence and sexualized socialization of very young girls. The design of this study facilitates an exploration of girls' understandings, while simultaneously allowing opportunities to reflect on the intervention processes involved in community activist programming that aims to raise girls' critical awareness of media influence on body image, and health issues.

As explained earlier in this chapter, this research is situated within the broader scope of my work on precocious sexualization at the YWCA, a complex action research project unfolding through many stages over five to six years, involving a number of partners and leading to various products. However, the scope of this thesis is much

smaller, centring on one of those stages, the analysis of three focus groups with girls 9 to 12 years old. This study will thus not appear to follow a classic action-research design since what is being made visible is only a part of the overall project: one of the data collection activities, contributing to the creation of knowledge that will inform intervention tools. To understand the study's research design, however, it is nonetheless important to situate the methodology within the parameters of action research, as I shall explain in the following sections.

### ***1. Why Action Research?***

Action research is a model of choice for researchers who want to link theory to social change. Reason & Bradbury (2001) define action research as seeking “to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people and more general the flourishing of individual persons and their communities” (p. 1). Kurt Lewin, a pioneer in adult education, introduced the concept of *action research* in 1946 in an article entitled “Action research and minority problems”. Lewin died suddenly a year later and never had a chance to systematize its principles, but the ideas had already been formulated in several of his early projects and writings. Based on Lewin's writings, Bargal (2006) proposed a number of principles that underlie both this research project specifically and our work with girls and young women at the YWCA more generally. According to Bargal (2006) action research is important because it promotes the value of personal experience and gives a voice to those who might have been politically and culturally silenced by more conventional forms of social inquiry. It is thus a suitable choice for researching preadolescent girls who constitute one of such cohorts. Certain features that

reflect its core principles can characterize action research. Of particular importance to this thesis are the following principles: a) Combines a systematic study, sometimes experimental, of a social problem as well as the endeavours to solve it; b) includes a spiral process of data collection to determine goals, action to implement goals and assessment of the result of the intervention; c) takes into account issues of values, objectives and the power needs of the parties involved; d) serves to create knowledge, to formulate principles of intervention and also to develop instruments for selection, intervention and training.

## ***2. Feminist Action Research: A Guide for Interpretation***

The broader project on precocious sexualization within which this study is situated is framed in the interpretative lens of feminist action research, which builds upon feminist analysis and theory. For most feminists, research is an interpretative and political process through which humans construct meaning. The knowledge that we are able to observe and reveal is related to where we stand in the world, our vantage point, where we are situated. An important consideration for feminist activists is, in Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (1999) words, to remember that knowledge is "deeply embedded in the multiple layers of imperial and colonial practices" (p. 2). Because of this it is important to attempt to decolonize our thinking and situate our knowledge.

Research does not become feminist by focusing on women, or by having women researchers; what makes research feminist are the concerns and motives, as well as the knowledge brought into the process. The Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children (n.d.), states that effective feminist research is based on experience, focuses on issues that matter, does not exploit women, embraces diversity, welcomes

understanding which may contradict accepted norms, involves change, is supportive of the meaning women give to their own experience, provides a space and opportunity for listening to women's voices, links ways of researching with ways of knowing and provides a process for mobilization around issues (Morris, 2002). All these principles guide our work at the YWCA.

An important issue in feminist research is that not all women have the same experience of oppression. This raises the question of how is it possible to arrive at universally acceptable notions applicable to all women if individual experience leads to distinctive knowledge. Franks (2002) proposed three critical influences in examining women's experience from a feminist point of view: *situation, standpoint and positionality*. The dilemma is that these influences highlight difference which works against universality. Difference arises not only from the variety of ideologies women adhere to, their identity politics, the many ways of expressing their sexuality, their language, race and ethnicity, as well as their different strategies for resisting oppression, but also –and at the very core of the question- through different understandings of what it means to be a woman.

Harding (1991) has suggested that there are two types of objectivity, “weak” and “strong”. In the first, the researcher attempts to remain invisible and pretends that the biographical and cultural aspects of knowing do not influence the knowledge that is produced. In the latter, by disclosing their own *standpoint* and biases, feminist social researchers allow readers to analyze how the researcher might have influenced the research, and construct strong objectivity (Edwards, 1990; Harding, 1987).

This feminist research lens was particularly important in terms of the study design and the interpretation of data since due to my standpoint as community practitioner and my extensive experience working with girls and women; I cannot claim to be totally unbiased. This issue is further explored in the section on trustworthiness later in this chapter.

### ***3. Practitioner Research***

Because my professional practice is explicitly situated within a framework of social action to empower girls, the concept of *practitioner research* was particularly useful in designing this study. McWilliams (2004), an educator, contends that practitioner research can contribute to vigorous new thinking. To its critics, however, practitioner research is “a theory free zone in which ‘reflecting on practice’ has little meaning beyond the enactment of a flabby new humanism” (p.114). To those who laud it, it is more ethical, because it invites outsiders to take part in the process of social inquiry. Moreover, because practitioner research is also politically engaged, it can play a part in the politics of resistance to institutional and social oppression.

This dual role of the researcher as “action research facilitator” and “socially critical political actor” is fundamental to its internal tensions. Being a socially engaged practitioner is a political act. As activists we see injustice and we look for ways to act in order to affect social change, we have a vision of an ideal society where injustice does not exist and we work towards that vision. However, according to Elliott (1988), the task of the action research facilitator is “not to generate critical theories but to stimulate the process of reflection which will enable insiders to generate their own” (p. 165). In other words, in our role as facilitators, we do not wish to impose our ideas upon our group

participants; rather, we want to create a process where they will feel empowered to formulate their own critical ideas (i.e. about negative media influence) and act upon them. This in our view constitutes emancipation. Tensions might arise and become problematic when the critical ideas that participants formulate for themselves contradict our own views. This is part of the internal dilemma of our work.

Of particular interest is McWilliams' (2004) analysis of the trend to replace the word "emancipation" by the very popular term "empowerment", which serves to diminish its political and social activist connotations. Girls today are encouraged to feel empowered by acting sexy, not to take charge of their lives by pursuing their own projects (Lamb, 2007). Although the word empowerment conjures endless possibilities for both individuals and communities, it has become a catch phrase meant to give the appearance of power while promoting conformity; an example perhaps of what Italian feminist professor Patrizia Romito (2006) has called the occultation of violence through the sanitization of language.

The main purpose of practitioner research is not only to improve practice but, through the use of a critical theory perspective, to lead towards social progress and emancipation where knowledge has, in Hooley's words (2005), a "distinctly ideological location". Emancipatory learning can directly challenge the beliefs, practices and values of participants and support the development of far reaching views and ideas. It is our ongoing hope that the leadership programs of the Montreal YWCA will encourage girls to align themselves and act upon the grand narratives of reconciliation, peace and justice. This research project is therefore grounded in an activist stance.

## **IV. Conducting the Research**

### ***1. Research Assistants***

As part of the recruitment process, I visited each community centre accompanied by one of two group facilitators who had volunteered to act as my assistants. Two young women who facilitate girls' groups at the YWCA, Jade and Carlye, acted as facilitators for this project. In a sense, they are co-investigators, since their questions and suggestions about interview techniques, helped shape the direction of the interviews and their post-interview observations were germane to the analysis. Jade further assisted me in listening to the audio taped interviews to ensure that I adequately captured and understood girls' use of slang words and expressions. I had asked the two assistants to act as primary facilitators in order to allow me to concentrate on noting individual behaviour and group dynamics. The age of the assistants (nearly three decades younger than the principal investigator) was a further reason for assigning them the primary interviewer role; I thought that girls might feel more at ease if a young person who interacts with girls their age on a daily basis acted as lead facilitator.

### ***2. Participant Recruitment, Ethics, and Safety***

After receiving Ethics approval from the University, twenty girls between the ages of 9 and 12 were recruited to participate through community centres associated with the Montreal YWCA. The YWCA is located downtown and is not easily accessible to girls; therefore our girls' programs are usually delivered in elementary and high schools as well as community centres located in low-income neighbourhoods within a 45-minute radius of our offices. For this study, we asked three of the centres we work with which are located in different neighbourhoods and cater to children from a variety of ethnic

backgrounds, to become partners in this project. Our purpose was to recruit ethnically diverse girls as well as to insure age representation within the sample.

At each centre we met with preteen girls who attend after-school activities offered weekly by the centre's in-house counsellors. We visited them during scheduled activity time, i.e. Group A met on Tuesdays from 5 to 6:30 PM for after school activities. We were thus limited by their availability and I was further limited by the availability of my assistants who had other scheduled groups to facilitate. At the initial recruitment meeting, we explained the purposes and process of the study and distributed parental and personal consent forms to those girls who expressed interest in volunteering to participate (see Appendix B). It was made clear that signed consent forms were essential for participation; that results were confidential and that participants could withdraw at any time. Arrangements were also made with each centre's counsellor to ensure that they would be available during and after the sessions to support any girl who might experience discomfort during the group meetings, and/or who wished to withdraw her participation, and/or in the eventuality that information surfaced indicating that a particular girl was at risk or in danger of experiencing abuse in some area of her personal life.

### ***3. Peer Focus Groups***

For the purposes of this study *peer focus groups* were used. A focus group is a research technique that originated in the late 1930's with a number of social scientists who were concerned about the accuracy of traditional information gathering methods. In 1941 Merton, a prominent and influential social scientist started using focused group interviews to evaluate audience responses to radio programs. Kreuger (1988) defines focus groups as a "carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perception in a



defined area of interest in a permissive, non – threatening environment” (p.18). Short (2006) highlights the importance of the group aspect over the interview strategy since the unit of analysis of this technique is the group rather than the individual. As participants interact and ask questions or build upon each other’s statements, the ensuing dialogue introduces new elements and alternate interpretations, which enrich the data that can be extracted.

*Peer-group discussions* is a term used by many researchers to refer to a particular type of focus group that involves adolescents, since peer-group influence is seen as having primacy during adolescence (Hickey & Keddie, 2004). James, Jenks & Prout (1998), have emphasized the importance of providing the time and the space for children to reflect and offer their interpretations of the social world. Peer group interviews are interesting because they allow for plentiful data to emerge in a short period of time and the establishment of dynamic interaction, or synergy, between participants. In this process, participants are challenged and stimulated in ways that might not have taken place in individual interviews (Bogdan & Bilken, 2003).

#### ***4. Conducting the Group Interviews (Focus Groups)***

Peer group discussions (interviews) were carried out with three groups of 9-12 year old girls (Groups, A, B, and C). Each group met twice with the researcher and one of the research assistants, for a total of six meetings. There was no background information collected on participants other than observational as we felt that requesting it would have been intrusive, adding to the many layers of surveillance many of these families already encounter. However, because the three community centres are located in neighbourhoods with low socio-economic status, it is likely that most, if not all of the girls, were from

low-income families. Further, because some of the girls in Group C talked spontaneously about their parents' ages (many of whom were still in their twenties), we can assume that some of these girls had been born to teenage mothers.

At the beginning of each group meeting, the rules of engagement used in all girl groups at the YWCA were reviewed. Those rules concern mutual respect, allowing others to voice their opinions, confidentiality and so forth. Pizza and juice were provided in all six sessions. All of the group interviews were carried out between May 29 and June 11, 2007. Sessions lasted between an hour and one and a half hours each and were audio taped; they were ended when girls appeared to become restless.

Since the interviews were deliberately open-ended, we agreed that the researcher and the counsellors present (see below) were also free to ask participants for impromptu clarifications on their comments. This made the sessions more like an authentic conversation involving everyone present. The researcher also made detailed notes both during and immediately after the sessions, which were followed by a debriefing session with each assistant and participating counsellors in order to compare observations and enrich the data collected.

### ***5. Counsellor Participation***

In two of the groups, counsellors from the participating centres wanted to be present during group meetings, and accordingly, the girls were asked if they were in agreement. In Group A, two counsellors were present only at the second session because during the first session, one of the girls did not want to say certain words in their presence and she asked them if they minded leaving the room; in Group B, there was no counsellor present and in Group C, one counsellor participated in both sessions. When the

counsellors were present, girls were clearly concerned about getting in trouble if they mentioned certain “forbidden” words. In my observation, and in retrospect, counsellor presence acted as a deterrent to free participation and may have impeded our access to certain data. We were otherwise pleased to observe the love and concern that all counsellors expressed about the girls’ well-being.

#### **IV. Description of the Focus Groups**

Most of the twenty girls who participated in the study have backgrounds that might be labelled as “socially disadvantaged”, including various combinations of visible minority, low-income neighbourhood, and linguistic minority. The majority of the girls were of Afro-Caribbean or South Asian origin or descent; in other words, they were “racialized” within the larger Montreal community. Yasmin Jiwani (2006), in an article on racialized girls in the West coast of Canada, expressed the complexity of citizenship for these girls in the following terms:

Positioned in the “colourful” end of the white/non-white pole of national cultural identity, and enduring legacy of the nation’s colonial roots, racialized groups cannot take their citizenship for granted (Razack, 1998) (...) Belonging to the nation – and by this I mean acquiring a self-identity as a citizen, and not merely the possession of a certificate (...) is constituted in the realm of everyday life. One is formed as a citizen of a nation through daily dialogical processes of self-making. This occurs in everyday life as one’s racialized, ethnicized, sexualized, gendered, classed, linguicized, and other socially constructed and signified identifications are manufactured in relation to others in one’s immediate social environment. (p. 92-93)

All group interviews were carried out in English, although with participants in Group A we sometimes spoke French; some of the girls appeared very shy and we wanted to be sure that the issue was not that they felt impeded to express themselves by lack of mastery of the language. All the girls in Group A were fairly recent immigrants and attended school in French; although switching to French during the sessions appeared

to make no difference in terms of their participation. The other two groups attended English schools and we spoke English throughout the sessions. This situation speaks of the multiple layers of experience and marginalization that take place beyond the racialization of girls. In the case of the South Asian girls, they spoke – for example- Urdu or Tamil and English at home and French at school. The Afro-Caribbean girls, spoke English at school and at home and belonged not only to a racial minority but also to a linguistic minority within a majority of French speakers in the province of Quebec.

### ***1. Description of Group A***

The first community centre where interviews took place was located in a transitional community, one with many recent immigrants who often move to other communities once they have solidified their economic base. Here people do not tend to establish long-term community roots. There were five 9-11 year old girls in this group, four of whom were South Asian and one was of African origins. Originally, three 12 year olds had also agreed to participate and had permission to do so but once one of them changed her mind, her friends also decided not to participate, which is consistent with girl-group dynamics.

In the remaining group of five, one of the girls was a performer. By this I mean that she attempted to dominate interactions and to remain centre-stage throughout the sessions by the use of various tricks such as interruptions, making noise, changing the subject or causing laughter. This participant was a “close friend” of the only Black girl in the group; however her behaviour towards her could be labelled provocative, as she appeared to be playing a power game whenever the other girl expressed fear or vulnerability. There were many instances when this dynamic played itself out. In one of

those instances, when her friend mentioned that she was afraid of men who track young girls through chat rooms, she mentioned casually that she had posted her friends' personal information on a social site, causing her to wince.

Three of the remaining girls, all of them of South Asian background, were very quiet and shy. At the YWCA, our experience working with South Asian girls for longer periods of time has shown us that given time, girls from such backgrounds often overcome their shyness, which might not be real shyness so much as a culturally scripted behaviour. Two sessions with them did not allow enough time for this to happen, if indeed it ever would have. It is important to note, however, that the fourth girl of South Asian background participated actively in the sessions; this suggests that cultural stereotypes or scripts do not always apply.

## ***2. Description of Group B***

This group of eight girls, composed mostly of 11 and 12 year olds, was gathered at a centre catering to a community with a large population of second and third generation immigrants of Afro-Caribbean background. Except for one 10 year old, all of the girls were Black. In this group, there were many comings and goings and lack of clarity about permission slips, whether they had been signed, forgotten, left in school lockers (the activity happened after school) or given to the wrong person. To solve the impasse, a counsellor from the centre called each of the parents over the phone to confirm whether those girls who wanted to participate but had not brought in the consent form, had parental consent. She verified that parents had read the forms, were well informed about the research, and had agreed to their daughter's participation; the counsellor signed the permission slips on their behalf.

Participants came in and left for various reasons, arrived late and left early, had to go to the washroom, had urgent personal matters to solve on the spot with their friends, sometimes inside the room and sometimes outside. They maintained simultaneous conversations, threw the pictures and the “talking ball” around the table (a prop that we decided to use in this second group trying to prevent participants from talking all at once), made lots of noise, sang, changed places and practiced some dance moves. At one point, one girl lay down on the table briefly with her back to the researcher and the assistant so that she could better hear a side conversation between two other girls. It is unclear if all of this “off task” activity in Group B was due to group, cultural or neighbourhood dynamics. Perhaps the absence of counsellors in the room, or the older age of the girls played a role or maybe the rules of the centre allowed for such flexibility. Whatever the case may be, all this activity and what from my professional expectation seemed -at times- chaotic functioning and interaction, did not seem connected to a lack of interest in participation. Although it was made clear to the participants, before and during the sessions, that they could choose to leave the room at any time and that participation remained voluntary throughout, they chose to stay, participated, and returned for the next session.

At the end of the second session, one of the girls started *stomping*, a type of dance where the music is made by stomping with the feet and by different forms of hand clapping. Most of the other girls joined in. I was fascinated to see how this group, which had appeared unstructured and chaotic, could organize itself so quickly and efficiently to produce well-orchestrated music and dance. Unfortunately, this wonderful impromptu show had to be stopped when a representative from a group in another room came to

complain about the noise. Witnessing this dance provided an interesting counterpoint to the mainstream and commercialized images we had been discussing during the session.

### ***3. Description of Group C***

This group of seven girls was interviewed at a community centre serving a well-established working-class community. This group included the youngest of all project participants: seven 9 and 10 year olds. Six of them were Caucasian and one was of Afro-Caribbean background. In contrast to Group B, this group remained quite focused on the discussions. It is unclear whether this was related to the presence of the counsellor in the room, the size of the room which was quite small, a particular dynamic of this group, or the fact that since the metal chairs made loud screeching noises when moved, the girls were asked to avoid moving around if possible. During the course of the project, one of the participants in this group disclosed her personal situation of family violence, which allowed us to organize a follow up with the centre's counsellor.

## **V. Group Interview Methods**

The peer group interviews/workshops were, for the most part, unstructured and free flowing. Because the participants knew each other through after school activities at each centre and some of them were also classmates and friends, there was no need for "getting to know each other" icebreakers. Conversation was easy to spark.

### ***1. Photo-Elicitation***

After consultation with the girl-group facilitators in my department and as part of the study design, we decided to initiate conversation by showing the girls pictures of popular female singers, a technique known as photo elicitation (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004). This technique helps focus the discussion around topics relevant to the research, helps spark

free associations, and helps interviewees feel freer to talk by giving them something outside of themselves to discuss. Accordingly, a number of pictures of Caucasian and Black female pop singers were printed in color from fan sites, mostly from advertising photo shoots. At one point during the session, when the discussion led to music videos and how women are portrayed in them, pictures of male rappers surrounded by women were also shown.

The photos were already displayed, spread out on the table, when the girls arrived for each session. Participants quickly and spontaneously started pointing and commenting, e.g. *"she is pretty"*. The research assistant or I would then prompt them to expand their comments, e.g. *"what makes her pretty?"* And so on. Except for the very quiet girls in Group A and one girl in Group C, the participants needed little, if any, prompting. The girls voiced their opinions freely, frequently, vehemently and sometimes loudly. Although they could not always explain what they did or did not like, often they did not finish their sentences, and sometimes radically changed the direction of the conversation! They were allowed to go off on some tangents as long as they stayed more or less within the subject. When there were lulls in the conversation, participants were asked about their interactions with media, what TV shows they liked, whether they watched music videos, movies, chat on the Net and play video games, read magazines and books and what they like to do in their free time. We were looking for insights into their particular "girl-culture".

## ***2. Drawing Self-Portraits***

The initial plan was to explore the notion of sexiness in the first session and what participants felt about media representations of women, as well as how they saw



themselves in the future, during the second session. Considering that in Group A one of the participants dominated the interactions during the first meeting, and it was difficult to elicit opinions from some of the other girls, I proposed that during the second session the girls drew self-portraits of how they envision themselves in the future. This change of plan allowed the “shy girls” to express themselves through their drawings.

### **3. Additional Interview Strategies: Talking Ball and Role-Play**

The research assistant for Group B, Jade, knew most of the participants since she had already facilitated workshops with them at their school for the YWCA. Knowing that these girls tended to talk at the same time, which made it difficult to understand what they were saying, she proposed the use of a talking ball, a soft and stretchy toy that girls could pass to each other when they wanted to voice their opinions. The talking ball is a derivative of the *talking stick*, *feather*, or any of the other sacred objects used for centuries by Native Tribes during council circles to designate who has the right to speak, a means of insuring just and impartial hearing (Locust, 1997). Since the talking ball was not imbued with any sacred or important meaning for the participants, this strategy was not very successful and proved to be more of a distraction than a tool for concentration. In this group, some of the girls did not like to draw so they were invited to role-play themselves into the future, another attempt at focusing the energy of this very active group. One half of the group chose to draw pictures and the other half role-played an imaginary encounter between two of them, ten or twelve years into the future. In this imaginary encounter they were asked to share what was going on in their lives. It proved to be a very entertaining way for these outgoing participants to enact how they projected themselves into the future and bypass their self-perception as people who could not draw.

## **VI. Analysis of Data**

Using a modified version of a *grounded theory* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), we listened to the audio taped interviews repeatedly, noting emerging themes and significant phrases. Jade assisted me in making sure that slang words were properly captured and that all the themes had been noted. These procedures lead to the identification of preliminary categories that were resorted and regrouped into sub-categories through a technique known as *concept mapping*.

### **1. Concept Maps**

*Concept maps* are graphical tools for representing and organizing information and knowledge; Novak & Cañas (2006) define concepts as “a perceived regularity in events or objects, or records of events or objects, designated by a label”. Symbols, words or combinations of words are used as labels. Propositions contain two or more concepts that are connected by linking to form meaningful statements. Developed by Novak in the early 70’s to understand children’s knowledge of science, this method is based on the learning psychology of Ausubel (1963) whose fundamental idea is that “learning takes place by the assimilation of new concepts and propositions into existing concept and propositional frameworks held by the learner” (p.2). The popularity of concept maps or, as they are popularly known, *mind maps*, resides in their proclaimed ability to release the creative potential of the user in establishing new connections and ways of associating concepts.

### **2. Emerging Themes**

Themes that emerged from the audio taped interviews were tested in light of the data provided by the observation notes I took on group process and behaviour, as well as

the debriefing discussions with the research assistants and participating counsellors. As new connections emerged and subjective descriptions were further analyzed, interpretive descriptions of the girls' experiences were refined, forming the basis for interpretations which were eventually linked together in a grand narrative of "group think". In spite of the differences in age and ethnic origins, emerging themes were very consistent across all three focus groups.

All the participants who were at ease expressing their opinions (16 out of 20), were very familiar with the popular culture idols depicted in the media and they could recount details and stories relating the trials and tribulations of the pop stars' personal lives. A study by the Kaiser Family Foundation (2005) pointing to girls' extensive daily interaction with media echoes the experience of many of the girls in this study who reported listening to music and making extensive use of the Internet, as well as watching "a lot of TV" (one of the girls said 7 or 8 hours a day, which might have been an exaggeration). The participants in Groups A and C told us they often chatted on the Internet, but we were unsuccessful in finding out what they chatted about. This question was not meant as a way to intrude into children's exchanges with their friends but as an attempt to glean from their reactions if they engaged in sexualized chats, an aspect that has been identified as part of the precocious sexualization phenomenon (Lacroix, 2004). However, from their conversations, it was clear in both groups that many of their parents had warned them about the dangers of the Internet. Unfortunately, there was so much activity in Group B that we did not have the time to ask questions about Internet use.

### ***3. Quality of Data Collection and Interpretation***

In designing any research project, there is always the challenge to maximize the trustworthiness of the data collection and interpretation (what some call validity) as much as possible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this study, this involved establishing procedures that would enable me to ask and address certain critical questions: Were girls inhibited in their responses due to the presence of their peers, counsellors or for other reasons? How might their contributions be limited? Did they respond in ways they might have considered to be *safe*, destined to please their peers or the adults present in the room? Some researchers, including Morris (1997), also report a certain distancing happening between the researcher and children who identified with different ethnic groups; was that taking place here?

Various strategies were used to acknowledge and clarify these issues: prominently having a young woman (the two research assistant/facilitators described earlier) act as lead facilitator provided opportunity for the participants to identify with a young person. Because some of the girls knew the facilitators from other YWCA activities carried out at their community centre or school, a useful rapport was already well established with them. The informal and relaxed nature of the activity (including the provision of pizza and juice) was also helpful in creating an informal atmosphere conducive to open and frank discussion. Indeed, for the most part, the participants seemed very comfortable and eager to speak.

Having another person act as lead facilitator also gave me more time to make extensive notes on observations of group dynamics and behaviours. These observations facilitated a more valid interpretation of the data. For example, I was able to identify a

few instances where the girls intentions to please, test or impress adults seemed to play a role. At times, the presence of the centre's counsellors in two of the groups seemed to have an effect on what the girls said and how they said it. These observations were taken into account when interpreting what the girls' said and did. By participating as well as observing, a researcher is able to engage the girls in authentic discourse that reveals much about all participants, including the researcher. Tape recording all the sessions helps the researcher to remember not only *what* was said, but also *how* things were said (tone of voice, pauses, laughter and so forth). It also pushes the researcher to acknowledge and confront her own role in shaping the conversation.

In the next chapter we will hear the participants' voices and provide an analytical interpretation in response to the questions guiding this study.

## **Chapter IV**

### **CRITIQUING OR BUYING INTO SEXY?**

#### **ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETION OF THE FINDINGS**

The goal of this study was to explore how preadolescent girls voice their feelings about media messages promoting the adoption of sexual personas, in order to address the following research questions: How do preteen girls feel about being bombarded with sexualized media images? How do they make sense of those images? What mental constructs do they form around the concept of *sexiness*? How might these constructs influence them?

As described in detail in Chapter III, in order to address these questions, six peer group interviews were carried out with three groups of girls in community centres located in different low-income neighbourhoods in the city of Montreal. To recapitulate, Group A was mainly composed of South Asian girls, Group B, mainly of girls from Afro-Caribbean origins, and Group C, mainly of Caucasian girls. All girls were between 9 and 12 years old. The participants obviously liked being asked for their opinions and being listened to as they openly expressed their ideas and feelings about an over sexualized society and their perceptions about gendered relationships.

In reporting on the findings and for confidentiality purposes, the community centres and groups have been identified as A, B and C, and counsellors' and participants' names have been changed to protect their privacy. To ensure clarity and to acknowledge our roles as researchers, the names of the two research assistants: Carlye and Jade, and my name, Lilia have been preserved in the text.

## **I. The Meta Narrative or Script**

As I listened repeatedly to the tapes, stopping to transcribe certain sections and marking others for review, themes emerged that provided a snapshot of the girls' feelings and perceptions about "sexy" in relation to the media. Using a process described in the preceding chapter as concept mapping, themes were grouped and regrouped a number of times until a plausible association of concepts was developed. To arrive at a meaningful format for presenting my final interpretations, these concepts have been woven into a storyline, what might be called an integrated script or group narrative.

As I will illustrate in this chapter, the participants appeared to be performing a number of contradictory *scripts*, or learned texts. Some of the scripts seemed written by parents and other significant adults, specifically around what constitutes appropriate behaviour and the consequences of improper behaviour. Other scripts appeared to be rooted in social mores informed by patriarchal emphasis on clearly defined gendered roles and compulsory heterosexuality. Another set of scripts resonated with the stereotypical messages inculcated by the mainstream media around the desirability of projecting a sexy image and the lure of stardom. The notion of competing cultural scripts explained in Chapter II informs the profound paradox these girls appeared to find themselves in, since most of the participants were highly critical of the messages received through the media but were nonetheless enticed by them. The internal conflict between competing scripts was often evident as the following comment formulated by 10 year old Deepa from Group A, illustrates:

- *All our parents want us to be doctors; we want to follow our dreams...*

As mentioned above, emerging themes have been grouped as a scripted storyline where each category is introduced in Bold/Italics. This storyline links all the comments in an analytical synthesis. The emerging portrait illustrates participants' conception of gendered relationships, social norms and media influence. It is not a very positive one, although there are some interesting tensions, contradictions and counter texts that indicate that girls take much pleasure in critiquing "the messages" they are receiving. The following meta-narrative synthesizes their collective perception, what we might call their "group think":

Good girls are expected to behave in proper ways and avoid *transgressing norms of appearance and behaviour*; and gendered social rules mandate *heteronormativity*. Being a girl, *doing gender*, implies that *the body* must remain an *unfinished project*, which presents a *conundrum (to be or not to be sexy)*. Bodies must not carry the *burden of fat*, in order to display an image of *sexiness*, which is a crucial requirement to achieve *popularity*. *Popularity*, a surrogate way of achieving power, often involves *meanness* towards other girls and unpopular boys, but is necessary for attracting Alpha *boys (the harassers)* and *dangerous men (who are violent and rape)*. The instruction codes on how to be *sexy* are received through the media, particularly in the form of *popular music videos* and *pornography*. Looking sexy requires hard work and ultimately might lead to bad relationships.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will examine these concepts one by one and provide concrete examples from the interviews.



## II. Narrative Themes

### 1. *Transgressing Gender Norms of Appearance and Behaviour*

As participants in each group walked into the interview room, they were greeted and encouraged to serve themselves pizza and something to drink and sit around the table; all the girls were immediately drawn to the table where photographs of popular artists had been spread around, and spontaneously started to comment. All the pictures had been printed in colour from fan websites that had been chosen because they appeared to cater to young girls. Specifically, we sought to use pictures of artists that we knew preadolescent girls liked through our girl groups at the YWCA.

The following example illustrates how participants viewed what constitutes acceptable gendered behaviours. As Group A walks into the room, Deepa, a ten year old participant dressed in a fancy and sparkly *Salwar Kameez* (traditional South Asian clothing) walks immediately towards the table and points at a picture of Britney Spears. With a certain air of disdain she exclaims:

- *Britney is a 'bitch'!*

Carlye: *Why do you say that?*

- *She said "back off, he is my boyfriend"! And Ciara (pointing at the artist's picture) had a penis, her brother a vagina! She showed her butt in Oprah's (pause) She is killing herself to be skinny (Oprah?). Jessica (pointing at her picture) broke up with Nick and Britney cut up her hair!*

In the above comment, expressed in a whirlwind and with a mixture of disdain and disgust, we see that Deepa is (as were others in later comments) not only keeping up with information about popular stars but in a short sentence managed to be critical of the non compliance of a number of behavioural norms: women must not fight publicly over men or break up with them; in patriarchal societies hair is one of the great female sexual

attributes (a number of religions dictate modesty for women through the hiding of hair under wigs or scarves) so for a woman such as Britney who is supposed to be sexy, shaving her head is an affront; having the “wrong” type of genitalia is bad enough but showing one’s genitals on national television is unacceptable (of course, also untrue).

Einerson’s (1998) and other feminists in cultural studies (Garratt, 1990; Lewis, 1990; McRobbie, 1991) have underlined the important role popular culture plays in shaping female identity. We should note that Deepa, a chubby girl, is not only criticizing the transgression of acceptable behavioural norms but also indicating that she understands the cultural pressure to keep weight under control. As we shall see later on, girls are very aware of the pressures of being a woman in this society. The conundrum women face, and girls appear to learn quite early in life, is that even though they know that the norms and pressures are “crazy” (e.g. Oprah killing herself to be skinny etc), they seem to feel nonetheless compelled to conform to them.

Carlye decided to explore the issue of head-shaving a bit further:

Carlye: Does Britney look good bald?

There was a chorus of disapproval from all the girls in the room. Deepa decided to go on with her comments.

- *Britney looks like a slut, she wears a miniskirt and no undies, so you can see her vagina. In public she took off her bra, put flowers on her breast and was smiling. Maybe she takes drugs...*

The parents’ scripts are made evident here: “good girls” must not look like sluts or show their private parts in public and Britney has to be taking drugs in order to transgress so many norms. Later on in the exchange, Deepa came back to the subject of Britney, offering a final critical *slap in the face* to the disgraced star:

- *She looked nice but she turned ugly when she had babies and then she shaved her head (pause). Too much drugs, too much breaking up with boys, be mad to people, she beat someone with an umbrella!*

I wondered at the time if this participant had negative feelings about pregnancy and children, but this did not seem to be the case since later on she spoke at length about how much she liked babies, telling us warmly how lucky another participant was because she had a baby brother. However, Deepa was keenly aware that artists such as Britney are held to strict standards of image, even if they are having babies.

In all three groups, most of the participants had considerable knowledge about popular artists' lives and were open about voicing criticism couched in moral language. This appears to corroborate Einerson's (1998) exploration of preadolescent girls' use of moral language when referring to popular music stars. These girls' experience and interpretations of popular artists' behaviour, provides them with moral lessons as well as a vehicle for talking about morality. A reflexive play appears to take place between what is fed to them by popular culture, girls' identity formation and the use of *star gossip* as a way to foster interpersonal communications.

Although in the above description only one girl is talking, in all three groups there were gestures of disapproval from many girls when a transgression of some norm came up. In the same group, a 10 year old participant named Larissa, exclaimed:

- *I know a girl who kissed a boy on the lips and he was her cousin. (All the girls in the group gasped)*

In this situation, I think participants were primarily mirroring societal taboos against incest since the characters in the story were related, although since these girls were pre-pubertal there might have also been a subtext of "we are too young to do this", not wanting their peers or the researchers to misjudge them.

Group B also discussed Britney's hair-shaving exercise, which was viewed negatively, although one participant, obviously uncomfortable with the conversation, proposed that perhaps she had lost her hair because of cancer or had cut it to donate it to the organization that makes wigs for children with cancer<sup>9</sup>. This participant, Pearl, was the youngest in this group; consistently we observed in all three groups that the youngest girls were the most sympathetic, understanding and accepting of other people's shortcomings. Further research will be needed to validate this observation and better understand what kind of process leads some girls to harden up as they grow older.

## ***2. Heteronormativity***

As has been hinted at in the above section, and as will become more evident in the interview excerpts below, an important norm that participants felt could not be transgressed was that of heteronormativity. Butler (1990) used the term "heterosexual matrix" to designate the ways culture naturalizes hegemonic discourses, it assumes that for bodies to be coherent there must be a stable sex, expressed through stable "gendering": men must express masculinity and women must express femininity, which are hierarchically defined by the "compulsory practice of heterosexuality". This is illustrated in the following comment from one of the participants in Group A, who pronounced the statement as a rule that must be obeyed:

- *Women cannot be a couple.*

Some of the participants in Groups A and B seemed curiously reluctant to look at pictures of women and determine whether they were "sexy" or not. I think that the girls were concerned about being considered lesbians or to be acting inappropriately if they thought someone was sexy. Also, as I will explore later on in the text, their comments

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<sup>9</sup> The organization is called Locks of Love

and body language while formulating them, appeared to reflect a certain feeling of defensiveness as well as powerlessness:

- *(I can't comment) That is a girl; I can't be a lesbian*

In Group B, 11 year old Tanya looked frustrated:

- *We are women; if we were men we could tell you what makes women sexy...*

And 12-year old Ashley agreed:

- *Yeah! A guy will say, a girl is sexy when blah, blah, blah.*

In Group C, 10 year old Shameeka told us a long story about a romantic boat ride reserved only for two people, whom she described emphatically as: *a boy and a girl*. 9 year old Anita from the same group told a story about being in a park and seeing two girls kissing and a boy trying to break into the kiss. While the story was being told, participants perked up and some of them made disapproving sounds when 'two girls kissing' was mentioned. There was a small pause before Anita added that the boy broke into the kiss; this appeared to add to the general disbelief about the incident. Based on their body language, we interpreted the subtext of the story as: two girls kissing is bad enough, three people engaging in a display of sexuality is even worse.

Other exchanges among participants also denoted discomfort with sexual ambiguity and the transgression of heterosexual norms; however, this discomfort might also be connected to repressed desire or fascination. In two of the groups there was a lot of discussion around singer Ciara's (one of the artists whose picture was shown) presumed transexuality or hermaphroditism (it was not clear which since the story kept changing). We were told Ciara had appeared on Oprah and shown her genitals, which 10

year old Deepa qualified as being both brave and stupid<sup>10</sup>. We interpreted the subtext as: on the one hand, it takes a lot of courage to show your genitals in public (particularly since Deepa had told us she really wanted to be a star but was shy about singing in public); on the other hand, Deepa seemed to be clearly wondering why would anyone do something so “stupid,” something that made you look vulnerable in front of a national television audience. She was probably also being critical of the popularity of reality TV, where people bare their darkest secrets to large audiences. Tellingly, at the end of the second session with this group, when her friend Larissa had mentioned that she was sad we were not going to meet anymore because she liked what we did and enjoyed telling her secrets. Deepa looked at her with reproachful eyes and exclaimed: *you can't tell your secrets!*

The level of preoccupation these girls had about Ciara and about Britney's head shaving exercise, can be interpreted as intolerance for sexual ambiguity, or at least a clear awareness that one must appear to disapprove. As they harped on the subject, participants might have also been showing a desire to hear more, being intrigued and fascinated by the voyeurism involved in watching or hearing about other people transgressing the norms. We had a consistent impression from all three groups that, in these girls' view, norms should not be broken. This appears to confirm Lewin's (1946) understanding of peer group behaviour and Renold's (2005) analysis of preadolescent children's behaviour in a particular setting, which we will explore in the following section.

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<sup>10</sup> I searched the story on the Internet. According to D. Emery from the <http://urbanlegends.about.com/od/celebrities/a/ciara.htm> site, an Internet hoax has been circulating since 2004 with a presumed article by someone named N. Strong that is supposed to have appeared on allhiphop.com. The article announces that artist Ciara came out during an interview on BET. According to allhiphop.com no such story was ever published and it is unclear what motivation the writer had in starting this rumour. What is interesting to note is how the story had created an impression with lasting power in these young minds.

### 3. 'Doing Gender': Theorizing Normative Views

To better understand or interpret the girls' behaviour and reactions, it is useful to refer to Judith Butler's (1990) concept of *gendered performance*, the idea that gender is not something that we have but rather something that we repeatedly do through daily practices. We believe that participants' overall comments reflected concern with the practices and roles of femininity. As Butler (1990) has proposed:

The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self... significantly if gender is instituted through acts... then the *appearance of substance* is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and perform in the mode of belief. (Butler 1990, p. 140-1; quoted in Renold, 2005, p. 4).

Consequently, gender does not pre-exist but is produced and reproduced in ways that give the impression of a stable and coherent gendered identity. Butler (1990) had drawn attention to the potential for disruption during these gendered performances that she envisioned as taking place in two ways: new possibilities for alternative performances can appear during naturally occurring gaps between repetitions; and children might intentionally choose to violate the norms. Butler's concept of gendered performance is compelling but also problematic.

As Renold (2005) has observed in her ethnographic research in two elementary schools in England, children are very harsh critics, ready to point out, expose and criticize each other's transgressions. These attitudes and comments serve to consolidate and reinforce gender norms rather than to challenge them. Consequently, within the norms of the school's peer economy, it appears very difficult for young people to transgress the norms set by the group and there is a high price to be paid for doing so. In

other words, pack behaviour will tend to restrict impulses to violate the norms the group has set for itself.

This might also be understood within the framework contained in Kurt Lewin's (1946) principles relating to group behaviour. The first principle is *force field*; namely, group members apply pressure to individuals who stray from the standards the group has set for itself, the standards becoming a central force field that holds the individual in line. The second principle relates to resistance to change, if a group standard has great value, individual group members will experience great resistance to move away from it. The third principle is that it is usually easier to change the behaviour of a whole group than of each individual separately (Bargal, 2006).

We can assume that if the reactions of the participants in this study are somewhat representative of general preadolescent intolerance of blurred gendered lines, it is understandable that young people with homosexual tendencies might end up acting out their inner conflict by becoming more prone to risky behaviour than heterosexual youth. Surmounting the force field created by the peer-group requires great effort. According to a study by Meininger et al. (2002), a homosexual orientation might predispose a young teen to engage in precocious and risky *heterosexual* sex. Moreover, young people with homosexual tendencies appear to experience a higher incidence of domestic violence, depression, suicide attempts, eating disorders, substance abuse, homelessness, and pregnancy (Garofalo & Katz, 2001).

#### ***4. Bodies: The Unfinished Project***

McRobbie (1991) has proposed that girls are actively engaged with the pains as well as the pleasures of performing a visual identity. Later generations of feminist



theorists have drawn attention to the importance of not seeing girls as mere victims of society and highlighted the means by which they continuously contest and modify their subject positions. Our personal experience as adults might appear to corroborate this assertion, but the participants in this study challenged such an interpretation to some extent. It is important to underline that although in some ways the girls were indeed contesting their subject positions, they did not mention any of the pleasures of performing visual identities; it all seemed like hard work. In the deliberations of Group C, for example, Shilling's (1993) notion of the body as in constant need of work, an unfinished product, appeared clearly. The participants perceived that acquiring the desirable look proposed by the media required an extensive investment of labour, time and resources and they were mostly critical of women's efforts to achieve it. Most of the girls in the group eagerly engaged in the following exchange:

- *It takes a lot of work to look like that.*
- *They roll around in bed for hair to look like that.*
- *Even if their hair looks messed up they go to a professional to get it done, for no reason at all...*
- *They always work on their hair, make-up, jewellery and plastic surgery.*
- *They work on their clothes. They are all wearing half-things.*
- *They all try to look the same.*

##### **5. Body Conundrum: To Be or Not to Be Sexy**

Paradoxically, participants were at times highly critical of the efforts to look sexy or beautiful while at other times they admired the results: "*They try too hard!*" or "*they look nice and shiny!*" Caught between the competing scripts of 'good girls don't' and 'popular girls do' they appeared to know that in order to conform to the heterosexual

matrix, which participants perceived as women's role, being sexy was important.

Admiringly and with a dreamy voice, Larissa explained that being sexy:

- *Makes her (a hypothetical sexy woman) have a man, good men, who like to look at their butts, (and) nice body.*

Larissa was the only participant who never expressed open disapproval of all the work and effort women need to do to look good; she thought that dressing sexy was *needed* to get the *good men*, although these theoretical good men were otherwise absent in her comments. In other words, Larissa thought that working on one's appearance and body is the sensible thing to do. Other participants were more ambivalent, approving at times and disapproving at others, truly savouring their critiques.

However, do the efforts pay off or are looks beyond girls' control, a tributary of divine intervention? Deepa wasn't sure:

- *Your (sexy) body makes the boys like you, maybe she (one of the stars) was born to be sexy, (maybe a sexy body) is a gift from God.*

The issue of working to achieve a particular image requires further contextualization because although girls and women should not be seen as victims, as we saw in Chapter I, they are caught up in a powerful process of normalization that relies on disciplining the body (Lovell, 2000). Women's bodies are self-perceived as deficient and in constant need of improvement (Davis, 1995); therefore, choosing to reject the supporting beauty practices amounts to rejecting one's own identity. These practices ensure docility and obedience to prevalent cultural demands, although as Bordo (1993) has indicated they are, paradoxically, usually experienced as power and control. This process results in self-objectification, which can be explained by *Objectification Theory* (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Objectification Theory proposes that girls and women are

“typically acculturated to internalize an observer’s perspective as a primary view of their physical selves” (p.173). This leads to ongoing body monitoring and self-objectification, which in turn creates opportunities for shame and anxiety and diminishes awareness of internal bodily cues and opportunities for peak motivational states.

This process is particularly significant among preadolescents and adolescents, since acceptance into group identity appears to be dependant on the image the young person is capable of constructing (Frosh, Phoenix & Pattman, 2002; Frost, 2001). If image is largely a by-product of consumption, being a girl is defined by shopping and synonymous with appearance and domestication of the body. Appearance can determine group membership and exclusion as well as popularity and unpopularity.

As we saw in Chapter I, Goffman (1969) has proposed that producing an image of the self was neither optional nor mandatory; this is somewhat problematic because if the construction of image is both an intrinsic and unavoidable part of identity formation, why is it perceived as a source of so much grief, discontent and hard work? The fact that participants in this study were critical of spending too much time on body work might be reflective of their young age, since as girls enter adolescence their priorities often appear to change and spending time on visual identity seems to become not only more important but also an enjoyable ritual (Currie, 1999). Alternatively, it is also legitimate to question whether this transition represents a discovery of pleasure or the product of female domestication into acceptance of gender norms, a final colonization of girls’ spirit into submission to patriarchal and capitalist requirements. In other words, although most of the girls in this study seemed to be aware of and mostly critical of the pressures to conform to normative beauty practices, there is no guaranteeing that they will maintain or

act on their critique. As they become increasingly socialized and indoctrinated, will they eventually join, perhaps with reluctance, the older girls and stars who work like crazy to meet standards of sexiness or beauty that are almost impossible to achieve?

The disturbing situation awaiting these girls is that most girls and women neither meet the standards of beauty, nor have the means to pursue many of the expensive beauty practices proposed by consumer society. Because young women are constantly visible, and feminine beauty is a public performance, not only is the lack of beauty stigmatizing, but also the very expectation of beauty will stigmatize. Beauty is such a fleeting estate; it should perhaps be more appropriately considered a *stigma symbol* than a *prestige symbol* (Tseelon, 1995). Moreover, as the current standard of beauty is represented as Caucasian, non-Caucasian girls' are disadvantaged from the start. As Kaw's (1998) research shows "racial minorities may internalize a body image produced by the dominant culture's racial ideology and because of it, begin to loathe, mutilate and revise parts of their bodies" (p. 168). This might be happening for Larissa, one of the few participants in this study who openly admired the results of beauty practices and training into the arts of femininity:

- *She is beautiful; she has a nice voice, a nice smile. I like her gestures. I like the way she dresses. I want to be like her when I grow up. I want to be beautiful. I want to have long hair like her...*

As proponents of practices that will help girls develop critical thinking skills about the stereotypes fed to them by society through the media, it was interesting for us to see that participants in this study were already very critical of the current cultural female body project. However, thinking critically does not seem to be enough; these girls appeared to be caught up in an internal struggle between competing norms; whether to

behave like the “nice girls” their parents and teachers want them to be, or to look like the “sexy girls” the media tell them they need to be in order to achieve popularity.

#### **6. Bodies: The Burden of Fat**

As mentioned in Chapter II, in consumer society fat is unacceptable and stigmatized as deviant (Bartky, 1990). Most participants in this study had integrated the notion that excess weight was unsightly and unacceptable and some of them told stories about how they had been labelled *fat*. There was a lot of pain in Marie’s voice, a 10 year old participant in Group C, who was not obese but only a bit chubby, when she mentioned being called *fat*:

- *They call me fat cow and... (Brand name) turkey. They call me stuff and I pretend I don’t hear it.*

The group’s conversation veered off in a different direction but I could see that Marie kept a pained expression; a while later she added angrily:

- *They treat you like an animal!*

Participants in all groups were clear about the notion that society does not accept fat people. They seemed resigned to the idea even if it was not fair. The standard of slimness seems to apply – in their view- more to women than to men:

- *If someone isn’t skinny, they are going to be the funny or the stupid character.*
- *They make comedy out of people who are not skinny.*
- *Every singer that I see is skinny; there is not one fat (female) singer.*
- *They don’t have to; they choose to be skinny and half naked. (At least this participant wanted to resist).*
- *You can’t be fat, but there are some plus sized people. (But, you) can’t wear mini tops, doesn’t work and a belly that sticks out is not cool.*

- *If there is a rapper who is fat they will put it in their name and they are funny.*

Jade: can fat people be sexy?

- *Some are.... But not if they are very overweight.*

In Group A, a 9 year old participant mentioned that it was possible to see fat people on TV or magazines, but only:

- *If they are popular and do Oprah shows!*

Although Black men are rumoured to appreciate fleshier bodies, all the groups – including the one with mostly Black girls, repeatedly qualified the mandatory look as skinny. This might be interpreted as symptomatic of the power of the media to influence culture and impose new standards, which as we saw in Chapter II has been measured in a number of studies through *cultivation theory* (Gerbner et al., 1994).

Another issue that deserves to be explored is the link between body weight and the onset of menstruation. As explored in Chapter II, menstruation normally starts when a girl has enough body fat to support pregnancy. Consequently, early puberty is often linked to weight gain. In this study there were no questions asked about puberty but approximately half of the participants were Black and the majority of them, contrary to the other participants, had highly developed bodies both in height and sexual characteristics. This confirms studies suggesting that although all girls are reaching puberty earlier, African-American girls do so on average a year earlier than Caucasian girls, and are both taller and heavier (Herman-Giddens et al., 1997).

Moreover, in North America there has been an increase in the rate of obese children, and links have been proposed between the consumption of fattening foods, obesity and the induction of early puberty; this is problematic since cheap and fattening

meals are also closely related to the politics of class and race (Townsend et al, 2001).

However, from the visual observation of participants' bodies in this study, excess weight did not appear to be linked to the development of pubertal sexual characteristics, although it appear to correlate with lowered self-esteem.

### ***7. Sexiness: Ambivalence and Importance***

Overall, participants were very vocal and critical of sexual media representations of women while being at the same time very drawn to them. Most of the girls expressed frequent discomfort, often framed as disgust, with the overt, over-the-top sexuality and lack of clothing on the artists. The expression "*over the top*" was mentioned repeatedly in more than one group. Participants perceived a 'cookie cutter' concept behind those representations, a consistency of style and disturbing sameness. The following comments sum it up:

- *They are all skinny, 'slutty', provocative and wear 'half-clothes'.*
- *They are all young, rich and not wearing a bra.*
- *They wear kind of stripper clothes*
- *If they are not sexy they still can sing but will not be in the magazines.*

The individual artists' agency on the matter was problematic; to some of the girls '*it is their choice*', and for others '*the camera-people make them do it*'. Performer Avril Lavigne was cited, disapprovingly, as one who had started her career with a unique style and then became like all the others<sup>11</sup>. Might this indicate that girls hunger for successful models of rebellion against social norms, a desire to see young female stars experience

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<sup>11</sup> A group of teenage girls interviewed for the video we developed in cooperation with the National Film board (NFB), expressed the same opinions, both about disapproval of Lavigne's change towards a sexualized image that she had previously criticized but also about being 'had', forced by the music industry to adopt an image she might not agree with. See reference: Bisailon (producer)

success even though they don't dress or look the part? It's hard to say, but worth exploring in further research.

Although overt sexuality and nakedness, the '*inappropriateness*' of exposing one's body, the '*hanging all over the guys*' were disapproved of, to the girls, the music was obviously catchy, the glitzy representation of women fascinating, and looking '*shiny*' and becoming popular and rich was enticing. For example, all the participants appeared to approve of bare bellies; this comment sums up the feelings:

- *The clothes are nice when they show their bellies, beautiful, pierced and skinny.*

Men, however, did not appear to be held to the same standards of mandatory sexiness:

- *Men put pants low and wear boxers, big shirts and bandanas in the head. Sometimes they wear fake jewellery but the real ones are nice.*

The representations of female glitz are not casual and they are made to look accessible to all girls. Russell & Tyler (2002), writing about a chain of popular stores in the United States and England called *Girl Heaven* that targets preteen girls, described the stores as displaying a "glittery theatricality...(which) provides a sensory overload... a *hyperaestheticization*". (p. 627). These stores offer a narrow range of products designed to encourage girls to pursue a feminine aesthetic, including makeovers, while ensuring that the experience of being there, where clerks regularly perform dance routines, produces an atmosphere of excitement.

It is possible to identify in this trend many of the characteristics of marketing targeted at girls in current times, both in the promotion of stereotypical ideals of femininity as well as in what Beaudrillard (1993) called *simulacra*, a fantasy experience



that envelopes the participant in ways that blur the lines between reality and fantasy. Moreover, this indoctrination into dreams of being a star or a diva, starts at the cradle with Disney's total experience for very little girls around princess fantasy themes (Lamb & Brown, 2006) and is made accessible to all girls through television.

In the PBS documentary *The Merchants of Cool*, narrator Rushkoff (2001)<sup>12</sup> speaks of this blurring of the lines and ambivalent relationship between the media and children:

Who is mirroring whom? Real life and TV life have begun to blur. Is the media really reflecting the world of kids, or is it the other way around? The answer is increasingly hard to make out. I'll never forget the moment that 13-year-old Barbara and her friends spotted our crew during a party between their auditions. They appeared to be dancing for us, for our camera, as if to sell back to us, the media, what we had sold to them. And that's when it hit me: It's a giant feedback loop. The media watches kids and then sells them an image of themselves. Then kids watch those images and aspire to be that *mook* or *midriff* in the TV set. And the media is there watching them do that in order to craft new images for them, and so on (PBS, Frontline 2001, transcript n.p.).

Within the media frenzy of sexualized images, it is appropriate to elucidate whether sexiness and sexuality are synonymous. Sexy is a concept that needs to be unpacked: sexy is about image and attitude, not about being sexual per se. According to Levy (2005), the current popularity of *raunch culture* is not intended to open people's minds about the mysteries and possibilities of sexuality; it rather reiterates –endlessly– a commercial ideal of sexiness. Popular icon Paris Hilton, for example, embodies the current fixation with image, represented by her blondness, richness, hotness and anti-intellectualism. In an undated interview with *Rolling Stone*, she declares: “*my boyfriends always tell me I'm not sexual, sexy, but not sexual*” (quoted in Levy, 2005, p.30). The

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<sup>12</sup> See Goodman, B. (2001) *The merchants of cool*. In PBS, Frontline, Program #1911. Boston: WGBH. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/etc/script.htmlMerchants of Cool>

cult of sexiness is about appeal, not sexual pleasure, not about connection but about consumption of image. Sexiness is about being worthwhile, somebody, and *hotness* appears to have become our cultural currency: “Hotness is not the same thing as beauty which has been valued throughout history. Hot can mean popular. Hot can mean talked about. But when it pertains to women, hot means two things in particular: fuckable and salable” (Levy, 2005 p. 31).

For females, the cultural script of sexiness requires showing eagerness, availability and welcoming any form of attention to their bodies. Slater & Tiggemann (2002), among many other researchers, found that girls as young as 12 placed greater emphasis on their appearance than in their competence. Participants in this study were well aware of that script, although it is not clear how much some of the younger ones understood about the implications of sexuality. One of the 12 year old participants in Group B, Tanya, understood that there were risks involved in acting sexy:

- *I think they are abusing these girls (the male rappers). They (the girls in music videos) don't care about their bodies until they get raped. (Emphatically) They are going to rape them!*

Sexiness, in participants' comments, was represented as the price of power couched as popularity. In their narrative, if women want power they have to be popular and being popular usually involves acting sexy, even if the style is not comfortable and sexiness might involve doing things they are not sure about and as we can see in the comment above, can have serious consequences.

In Group C, participants were talking about what 9 year old Marie had just called ‘*the tight people*’, girls dressing in skimpy clothes. Ten year old Shameeka added, talking about a girl she knew from school:

- *It is weird! She likes being uncomfortable (while wearing skimpy clothes), she told me...*

Lilia: why do you think she does it?

- *To be hot!*

Shameeka was emphatic and her tone denoted how important this was. Ten year old Shana added:

- *They dress sexy to impress the men...*

Emma (aged 9) added, in a mocking tone:

- *They think: I'm sexy look at me...*

The word sexy was mentioned liberally. I also asked Group B why they thought some girls dressed and acted sexy, particularly in view of all their criticisms:

- *They dress sexy to be popular*
- *Yeah! This girl at school walks like this (Pearl imitates a walk involving hip thrusting)*
- *Yeah... they shake their butts, dancing and walking.*

Ashley (age 11) talks disapprovingly about a girl she knows from school:

- *She always wears the same little clothes, acts dumb and hangs around the boys.*

11 year old Kelly agrees:

- *They look like Barbies, it's ugly!*

Lilia: when I say 'sexy' what other word comes to mind?

Amrita, a quiet participant in Group A (age 11), set the tone with a longing voice:

- *Beautiful!*

Sexy in Group A also meant wearing nice clothes, being pretty and good, but for most of the other girls those were two separate concepts. Beauty was seen as a mixture of

inner qualities and being pretty, which one of the girls in Group C, 9 year old Nelly, defined as:

- *Being fashionable, being yourself, nice but not slutty.*

Group C had the youngest girls, 9 and 10, so we expected that the parental script about the importance of being *nice* would be very more present in this group than with older girls.

The following exchange took place in Group B when one of the participants mentioned that one of the artists portrayed in the pictures was sexy:

Lilia: what is sexy?

12 year old Marisha informed us:

- *Sexy is hype*

Lilia: what does *hype* mean?

- *Hype is the new cool, cute and pretty at the same time but when you pass the limit...*

Here we see again a discomfort with transgression. The following comments, which in another section of this chapter were interpreted from the 'heterosexual matrix' angle, can also be seen as indicating a self-perception of powerlessness; girls are not the ones who create the rules but they feel pressured and enticed into adopting them.

Frustrated, 11 year old Tanya exclaimed:

- *We are women; if we were men we could tell you what makes women sexy...*

And 12 year old Ashley agreed:

- *Yeah! A guy will say, a girl is sexy when blah, blah, blah*

Toni added:

- *Guys think: look at her! Girls think: that is disgusting!*

This highly animated exchange took place between most of the participants in

Group B:

- *They try to show off.*
- *They try to be sexy and they go too much and they go like... like too far ... makes them look ugly.*
- *They look stupid!*
- *They think they are sexy, but it is just like... Aargh! (Screaming!) They try too hard...*
- *The people who are sexy don't try and not all the time; (those girls) they are like naked...*
- *Some singers perform ... and wear little shorts. I don't want to see that, they wear things.... I don't want to watch!*

The above exchanges indicate the discomfort participants felt about what they called 'over the top' sexuality of the artists. Perhaps they were also attempting to prove to each other and us that they were not 'that' type of girl, that they were 'nice girls'. Beyond the confines of this study, the next comment confirms an observation I have made as well as others researching the same issue; once girls decide that behaving and dressing *sexy* is what they need to do, they become unwilling to talk about it to researchers.

Twelve year old Marisha, shed light on the discussion:

- *If you dressed like them, you wouldn't be talking about them!*

Marisha, one of the oldest girls in the group, thought that girls who 'do' don't like to discuss their behaviour. This is significant since why would this be the case if as Curtis & Hunt (2007) have proposed; precocious sexual agency is not problematic and needs rather to be equated with newfound freedom. Based on our observations in the past few

years at the YWCA, girls who dress sexy appear to feel ambivalent about it, so we propose an alternative interpretative framework: some girls are sexually aggressive at a young age but this does not mean they are “liberating” themselves. They are simply doing what they feel they need to do in order to achieve popularity and the perceived power that comes with it. This concept will be further discussed in Chapter V.

Projecting a sexual image was sometimes problematic: Deepa, a 10 year old participant in Group A, touched all the pictures labelling the artists one by one:

- *Ho, slut, slut, ho and ho. She looks like a ho and a slut...*

Lilia: what is the difference between a ‘ho’ and a slut?

- *Sluts go out in the night and have sex with boys, hos same thing but in a different kind of way.*

There doesn’t appear to be much difference between ‘sleeping around’ and prostitution in this participant’s perception but she did not want to elaborate.

There is an inherent paradox in playing sexy. Girls are encouraged by boys and the media to adopt this identity, but if they do so, they are judged harshly by their peers as *trying too hard, showing off, looking stupid, ugly, being disgusting* and risk *being called names*.

Pearl, a 10 year old participant in Group B, told us:

- *Some boys will say: look at that singer, she dresses like that, why don’t you dress like that? Isn’t that a girl style?*

And 12 year old Tashika responded:

- *If we dressed like that in our school, they will be calling us some names...*

Although participants demonstrated a certain amount of agency in their comments, since it appeared that becoming sexy was a decision that at least some girls

felt entitled to make; there was simultaneously a sense of powerlessness being expressed. They thought that whatever they did was not going to be right: dressing sexy as the media and boys proposed made them into 'bad girls', being 'good girls' as parents and other significant adults expected of them, made them not popular.

As mentioned in Chapter I, Collins (1990) has conceptualized patterns of inequality as an interwoven "matrix of domination" where within the continuum of equality and inequality, people may be privileged or not depending on where they are situated. Participants in this study were all at a disadvantage and it is therefore not surprising that they experienced powerlessness.

Although the quasi-nakedness of the artists was universally condemned and bothersome (words such as *gross* and *disgusting* were used liberally in all the groups to describe them), simultaneously there was a lot of excited discussion about sexiness.

### ***8. Sexiness and Popularity***

Participants understood that accessing the power of stardom and its 'poor cousin', school popularity, involved an objectified sexuality that fascinated and repelled them at the same time since it opened the doors to popularity within schools and to richness and fame in society. As Aapola, Gonick & Harris (2005) have proposed: "young women learn that it is their sexual attractiveness to men that gives them legitimacy and value" (p. 151).

In Group A, two 10 year old participants, Larissa and Deepa, had the following exchange:

- *(It) makes her have a man, good men, who like to look at their butts, (and) nice body.*
- *Your (sexy) body makes the boys look at you.*

Curiously, only one of the participants in this study mentioned the issue of desire while talking about girls they knew who like to dress sexy:

- *She dresses like that when she gets horny...*

There were no other comments denoting any form of imagined or perceived pleasure in engaging on the rituals of sexiness. In all the other instances dressing sexy or 'doing it' was related to the price of popularity.

The importance of popularity is a consistent finding in adolescent research. Participants in Currie & Kelly's (2006) study distinguished between two meanings of the word, those girls who were liked by their peers and the ones who held power in the school. Participants in our study corroborated this notion. When asked about what concept they associate with the word *sexy*, many of the girls said popular, but popular was in turn associated with being well-liked for some and with sexiness, skinniness and being rich for others. The following exchange took place in Group A, between Amrita and Deepa:

- *When you are popular, everybody knows you...*
- *I'm popular! (Parodying) I have all this money in the world, a (striking a sexy pose) body and plastic surgery, and I am skinny, and have jewelry, and I can have all the men that I want. Ah, and I look skinny. I do surgery on my breasts.  
All the wannabes will want to be her.*

Through their gestures and excitement talking about the subject, it appeared clear to us that most of the participants were fascinated by the images of the stars. In all the groups, discussions about popular artists and sexiness elicited an emotional, charged response. Group C talked at length about imitating the dance moves they saw on TV and some of the participants in each group, wanted to grow up to be like them. Although only



two participants, Larissa and Shameeka, talked openly about wanting to be like the artists, a number of future self-projections drawn by some of the girls (see Appendix A) and enacted through role-play by others, reflected dreams of stardom or modelling.

- *She is beautiful, she has a nice voice, nice smile, I like her gestures, I like they way she dresses. I want to be like her.*

For Walkerdine (1997), as discussed in Chapter I, this might be a manifestation of working class girls' belief that stardom is the only way for them to envision a successful future, although as Harris (2005) pointed out, futures are not longer *guaranteed* for middle class girls either.

### **9. Popularity and Meanness**

In Lamb & Mikel Brown's (2006) analysis of stereotypes fed to girls through popular culture, particularly in films and teenage television programming, popularity and meanness came hand in hand. The concept being promoted through the media is that in order to be attractive to popular boys, whom I call *Alpha Boys*, girls need to be mean to other girls (who might want to act as competitors) and to unpopular boys who need to be humiliated or feminized in order to strengthen the *Alpha Boys'* power. 10 year old Shameeka, illustrated this strategy for us:

- *She is the leader, they try to get the boys to like them... so they can stay popular and then they start treating the boys badly when they are not cool anymore. Someone became uncool, and my cousin was going out with him and she told him that she hated him now.*

Lilia: how did he become 'uncool'?

- *He was friends with this guy and then they were not friends anymore and he became unpopular. He started crying and my cousin laughed at him.*

Carlye: how old was your cousin when this happened?

- *Eleven.*

This story also validates research by Currie & Kelly (2006):

Meanness is an expression of the discursive economy of peer culture. Within that economy, meanness positions the 'other' in a peer hierarchy through a process that robs the 'othered' of control. (...) It locates individual girls in a gendered economy where currency comes through resources associated with what Connell (1987) calls "emphasized femininity". The resources of this economy include being pretty, being skinny, and behaving in ways that win male attention." (p. 163)

As Renold (2002) has indicated when interpreting an incident she witnessed during her ethnographic research in elementary schools in England:

This was not an isolated incident. There were many occasions when girls of a high heterosexual ranking would engage in these types of scenarios, using their sexual prowess to subordinate and heterosexualize other, less desirable and often effeminate boys. (p. 423)

Understanding this game that in Deepa's words, *wannabe* popular girls play is central to this thesis. In order to receive public acknowledgement and recognition, at least from their peers, girls do not feel capable of accessing power directly. In girls' conception, power is achieved only by winning Alpha Boys' attention and involves meanness and acting in sexualized ways that emphasize their femininity and undermines the power of others. This issue not only illustrates inequality between boys and girls, it also elucidates why *fellatio* is such a significant practice in precocious sexualization. If girls were truly exploring *their* sexuality, they will give as often as they receive oral sex but this does not appear to be the case (Remez, 2000).

#### **10. Boys and Harassment**

In Group C, three of the girls spoke warmly about the music their fathers listened to. These were the only positive references made about males in any of the groups; men and boys were not otherwise depicted in a positive manner. While talking about boys' behaviour, this group of 9 and 10 year old participants, who were also classmates,

illustrated the rituals of boyhood and the pressures boys receive to conform to hegemonic masculinities by relating the following story: a schoolteacher had asked their class to describe the qualities that they would seek in a potential mate as they grew up. The storytellers said that most of the girls in the class wanted partners with traditional qualities, such as nice, friendly and handsome. Apparently one of the girls in the class had mentioned nice muscles, a comment that was received with some disapproving noises by the other girls in the group, which we interpreted as carrying the subtext of *'nice girls' don't care about those things*.

According to the girls telling the story, most of the boys said they would look for sexual attributes: *'nice bottom'*, *'hot'*, *'nice top'* and *'good in bed'*. When asked why they thought boys reacted this way, the girls answered that boys are always trying to be *cool* and funny and that they always make *dirty and sexual* remarks. These and other comments appear to corroborate Rushkoff's (PBS, 2001) description of the male stereotype that is being promoted through the media to boys: the *mook*, a male character that is gross, funny, vulgar and sexual. In Rushkoff's description, the female stereotype is the *midriff*, a character that is dumb, sexy, skinny, and likes to shop.

Continuing with the story, the storytellers said that the only boys who responded *seriously* to the teacher's questions were two boys who *'enjoy hanging out with the girls'*. Through the girls' body language, we got the impression that they thought these boys' behaviour was normal. However, it appears that boys who do not wish to engage in rituals of masculinity such as being gross or making sexual remarks must face consequences. Nine year old Laura, one of the storytellers, informed us that:

- *All the other boys are always calling them girly girls!*

Sexualized forms of harassment and violence have been rarely studied among preadolescents. Renold (2002) observed that boys not only sexually harass girls but that they also use violence in the production of “hegemonic heterosexual masculinities”. Connell (1995) argued that there is a continuous struggle to define *hegemonic masculinity* in opposition to subordinated masculinities as well as femininities. This notion highlights the idea that not all men oppress all women but that there is rather a more nuanced hierarchy of masculine and feminine behaviours in a continuum ranging from legitimate, where masculine sets the norm, to illegitimate and subordinated, which includes both feminine and feminized masculinity. Consequently, the concept of *hegemonic masculinity* highlights the importance in patriarchal societies of maintaining and fostering gender inequality (Dellinger, 2004).

The role of harassment in the construction of masculinity is also corroborated in Quinn’s (2002) research. She observed that sexual harassment, even when trivialized as play, functions as a game that boys and men play to build shared male social relationships and masculinity. In Quinn’s observation of “girl-watching” in a workplace context, males engaged in this game exclusively for each other’s sake and as they objectified girls and women, they also suppressed empathy for them while willingly ignoring all clues of female unease with regards to their behaviour.

Participants in this study described boys as mean and threatening. Group C, had a lot to say. They complained about boys grabbing them and making fun of them. The 9-10 year old girls in this group said that boys made fun of their names and accused them of playing with dolls. Marie explained:

- *We are older now so we do not like to play with dolls. They are for babies! (and added promptly) Except for Layla (the only one of the participants, who very self-assuredly had already told us she played with dolls).*

Marie's explanation didn't ring true, so I asked: did you stop playing with dolls because you don't like them anymore? Marie replied:

- *The boys make fun of us if we play with dolls.*

And 9 year old Jessica added:

- *Yeah, they like the girls with no clothes.*

In the last comment we can see not only how these young girls felt pressured to "grow up" and stop playing with dolls, but we also hear the subtext of a perceived pressure to be sexual.

The following exchange took place among three 12 year olds in Group B:

- *Boys will only look at what the girls are wearing, their bum and if they have breasts. They don't look at the face.*
- *They (the boys) are always saying dirty, sexual stuff about your body*
- *At our school some of the boys touch the girls' bums.*

To summarize, participants were frustrated, sometimes irate, because boys felt entitled to judge their bodies, whether they dressed fashionably or not, or if they were dressing '*too slutty*'. Boys also felt entitled to touch them in inappropriate ways.

Moreover, harassment did not seem to be an isolated incident. Participants in Group C mentioned that certain children were harassed on a regular basis; in particular, they mentioned one girl who wore "*old clothes*" because her family could not afford to dress her "*fashionably*". Participants in other girls' groups at the YWCA also report ongoing harassment from boys starting in elementary school. It appears that this phenomenon is prevalent and merits further research.

Participants in Group B also explained the process of *'picking up guys'*. Three 12 year olds and a 10 year old had the following conversation. Tashika got the conversation rolling:

- *In movies you go shopping to the Mall to pick up guys.*

And Nadia added:

- *You go to the Mall to find a guy...*

Pearl, the youngest girl in the group had not yet understood the economy of teenage relationships, at least the fictionalized version of that economy:

- *You go shopping for a man? How do you shop for a human?*

Ashley answered:

- *You go to the Mall and stand pretty...*

Back to Tashika:

- *And you yell, yo, yo...*

Ashley is emphatic and imitates a dismissive tone:

- *And then you say excuse me! Can you get away from me, please...!*

For Ashley, once the girls had lured the boys they had opened themselves to harassment.

### ***11. Dangerous Men***

Men were described in unflattering terms. For example, 10 year old Larissa told us that *men are sometimes lazy*. They were also seen as predatory and dangerous. The following exchange took place between Deepa and Larissa, both 10 year olds, as they interrupt each other:

- *When I was eight my mom told me all the stuff that is not good in the world. Like when you are small, kissing, a big man kissing you on the mouth, that is not good. Kidnapping, I am scared of...*
- *In the Net, men pretend being little boys...*
- *I do not want to say it because it might happen...*
- *You are afraid to get raped! (Deepa felt compelled to name Larissa's fear)*
- *What I am scared of is of going to a club...*
- *When you go to a club, a man is there, and he can have sex with you after that. They can put stuff in your drink; in the news they said they can put sperm in it too...*
- *Women are better than men because they listen*
- *Girls want money but guys are sexist, they think they are better than girls.*

In Group C, 10 year old Shameeka told the following heart-breaking story in a rather nonchalant way:

- *Sometimes relationships don't work. My mom and dad got into a fight and my dad left and my mom was crying. When she went out with my sister's dad, he punched her in the face and after he left. My mom wanted to do something bad to him. She took all his stuff and left it in front of his door and poured orange juice on it and a note in his pocket with a bunch of swear words. My mom asked me to help her do it and he is screaming.*

This brought an incredulous reaction from 9 year old Marie, who asked:

- *You helped her?*

Shameeka continued her story:

- *He broke her stuff also, and he grabbed us and slapped us if we did not do what he wanted us to do and throwed us on the bed. We are moving now because he lives across the street. She had to go to the hospital to get herself checked because she had a big bump.*

Shameeka had mentioned earlier on that her mother was pregnant. Carlye and I looked at each other in amazement since with the exception of Marie's comment, none of

the other girls reacted in any way to the story; they were eagerly lifting their hands for a chance to tell their own. We were at a loss to explain the lack of reaction from the other girls. Were they not listening? Were they only focused on what they were going to say next? Is family violence a normalized part of their existence? After the session we discussed this issue at length with the centre's counsellor so the organization could follow up with the family.

## ***12. Popular Music and Representations of Women***

Almost unanimously, the participants did not want to see naked women in media representations; they had noticed that men –for their part- almost always appear fully dressed. Group B was also very upset about how women behaved in music videos and this created a real dilemma for them; they understood hip-hop as part of their cultural heritage, they loved the music, they danced to it, but were upset about how women were represented. They were critical of how women behaved in these videos and thought that the women created trouble for themselves. They felt this sexualized culture was going too far. Eleven year old Toni told us with an expression of disgust in her face:

- (Women in the videos) *they touch themselves!*

The above comment got the discussion going! 12 year old Marisha then told us:

- *Akon (a well known male rapper) let a fourteen-year-old girl grind on him, it's illegal, he laid on top of her on stage. (Girls in another group told us the same story).*

Lilia: what does 'grinding' mean?

- *(Some of the girls attempt to explain unsuccessfully) It is like... it is like...*
- *Rubbin' up against each other in a lot of the videos. They want the girl to...*

Ashley, interrupting:



- *I think they are abusing these girls. They don't care about their bodies until they get raped. (Emphatically) They are going to rape them!*

In this comment we can hear the parental script: the rappers are abusing the girls but the girls are the ones not caring for their own bodies; that is until they encounter the certain future of rape.

Women's behaviour in music videos was seen as highly reproachable. Pearl told us:

- *I hate it when the girls are all over the rappers...*

But the males are not entirely without blame. 12 year old Marisha came back to the story she had attempted to tell before being interrupted. With an embarrassed and disgusted expression in her face, she told us:

- *I think Akon is messed up. I went to see him and... and... he is soooo much older than me and he hugged me...*

The comment was interrupted by one of her friends who tried to defend the rappers' behaviour:

- *Is all normal!*

Marisha persisted, refusing to buy the excuse:

- *But I was trying to get away...*

She then recreated the scene with another participant, who played 'Akon' persisting on an embrace with sexual overtones. Ten year-old Pearl commented:

- *If I were to meet Akon, I will say why is it so sexual?*

This entire exchange exemplifies one of the paradoxes expressed by the participants in this study, the girls loved the male rappers and participants in all three groups asked to see pictures of them. Some of the girls even asked if they could take

them home; yet at the same time, they were upset by the way men and women were represented. Within the African American community, there is a lot of discussion about who might be to blame for the sexism and misogyny in the lyrics and the visuals of hip-hop music. An article by Johnson (2007), a correspondent to Black Entertainment Television (BET), discusses how the lyrics and the imagery have become blatantly obscene and this is interpreted as an inheritance of colonialism and the sexism that has persisted within the community for centuries.

The American Psychological Association (APA, 2007) believes that music videos are one of the most important vehicles for sexualizing girls. Sexualization does not only refer to sexual practices and sexualized clothing but also to the mental constructs girls' form about sexual relations. Ward & Rivadeneyra (2002) found that 84 % of the music videos shown on Black Entertainment Television had sexual imagery. A number of studies have pointed to the impact stereotypical sexualized images have on shaping children's identity. Ward, Hansbrough & Walker (2005) noted how the hip-hop music video genre is more male dominated and gender segregated than others (between 56% and 84 % of the artists and 90 % of directors). Moreover in hip-hop, males are portrayed as dominant, aggressive and adventurous, heavily emphasizing sexual posturing (Arnett, 2002). The treatment of women is predominantly sexist and condescending with an almost exclusive focus on sexual appeal. Women are portrayed as objectified, decorative objects whose function is to please and entice men by dancing in sexualized ways while wearing revealing and provocative clothing (Andsager & Roe, 1999).

Further research by Martino et al. (2006) published in the journal *Pediatrics*, explores how exposure to degrading music lyrics encourages sexual precocity and other

unhealthy behaviours in young teens. As girls listen over and over to the music, and dance to the rhythms they love, a process of normalization occurs. This normalization of violence and misogyny in a young mind is a cause for concern. To illustrate the potential impact of this genre on girls, what follows is an example of the lyrics by one of the artists the participants in this study listened to, Akon's *I wanna fuck you* lyrics:

*Money in the air as mo feel grad you by your coat tail take you to the motel, hoe sale,  
dont tell, wont tell, baby said I dont talk dogg but she told on me, oh well,  
take a picture wit me, what the flick gon do, baby stick to me & ima stick on u,  
if u pick me then ima pick on you, d-o-double g and im here to put this dick on you,  
I'm stuck on pussy n urs is right, wrip ridinin them poles and them doors is tight  
and ima get me a shot for the end of the night cuz pussy is pussy and baby ur  
pussy for life.*<sup>13</sup>

Although most of the participants were highly critical of the lyrics and behaviours of the artists, 10 year old Larissa from Group A could not contain her admiration while pointing at the pictures:

- *I want to be their biggest fan and see their shows. I never been to a show before. I wish they were my sister or brother.*

Carlye: Why do you want them to be your sister or brother?

- *To be closer to them so they can teach me how to sing, help me with my homework and be with me, stuff like that. I'll be proud and they can give me advice.*

When Carlye asked what kind of advice she wanted, she said:

- *Would you make me a star, please!*

Carlye: Why do you want to be a star?

- *I want to be a star to earn lots of money cause I want to take care of my family for the rest of my life.*

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<sup>13</sup> Retrieved from <http://www.lyricsandsongs.com/song/772895.html>

We were moved by Larissa's innocence and desire to take responsibility for her family; we were also concerned about Deepa's sexualization, since at ten years old almost every one of her sentences contained a sexual theme. After the session with their group we discussed our concern with Centre A's facilitators. We were told that a therapist had been following her because she had taken part in an incident where an older teenage boy had shown a pornographic film to a group of girls. They were not sure if the boy had also molested her, she was not talking and as we saw earlier on in this chapter, she felt that *secrets* should not be shared.

The 9 and 10 year old Caucasian girls in Group C also told us they went 'crazy' dancing to music videos, although their parents disapproved. Nine year old Shana tells the story:

- *I was in my mom's room, I turned the TV on and I was crazy dancing and singing and there were swear words.*

Lilia: what kind of swear words?

Shana had to be reassured by the centre's counsellor that she was not going to get in trouble for repeating swear words:

- *"Act like a bitch and take it like a whore"*

Another participant, Anita, added:

- *Most of the songs have bad words in them! Even the ones we dance to for the show, so we hum those parts instead.*

Layla clarified:

- *My father listens to old songs, those have no bad words.*

Layla had just offered us an insight into the evolution of popular music, since overt sexual lyrics used to be the exception rather than the rule.

### 13. Pornography

Many of the participants appeared to have watched some pornography 'by accident', the entire group giggled as one of the participants in Group C, 9 year old Jessica, related that:

- *It was full of hairy butts!*

But in Group A, Larissa was very serious:

- *I was with my cousin and could not sleep; we saw movies about the **thing**.*  
(The word thing was pronounced with ominous emphasis)

Deepa interjected, 'translating' for us:

- *Porno came on.*

Larissa continued with obvious guilt and fear of tarnishing her image, since throughout the sessions, she displayed a strong willingness to be seen as a 'good girl':

- *Watched a bit. I thought that was wrong.*

Poulin & Laprade (2006) observed that pornography is affecting culture in a deep way. They quote a survey by the Kinsey Institute (2004) that indicated that 86 % of respondents believed pornography was useful in providing sexual education. Many men, particularly young ones, believed that this medium helped them understand *what women expected of sexuality* and for many it has become the main source of sexual education. However, for Poulin & Laprade, pornography "infantilizes women and feminizes children"; a dynamic they see at the very core of the issue of the sexualization of young girls. For example, since pornography involves 'total visibility' of the genitals, the previously marginal practice of total female body depilation has now become mainstream. Young girls at puberty are starting to demand and pay for the same "Brazilian" wax jobs that their mothers may also be trying out.

Dr. Franzeska Baltzer, director of the adolescent clinic at the Montreal Children Hospital agrees. During her presentation at the Day of Reflection organized in May 2005, she mentioned that doctors at her clinic were surprised when they saw a girl that was *not* totally shaved<sup>14</sup>. Poulin & Laprade (2006) contend that girls and women are being sold on the idea that this is a hygienic practice, further promoted by feminine hygiene advertising that sends the message to girls that women's bodies are 'dirty' and have to be washed, deodorized, shaved, perfumed and prevented from any form of 'leakage' of body fluids.

Besides ignoring the biological usefulness of body hair, this practice of female genital depilation is of concern because the epilated pubis of a woman infantilizes her, making her look like a young girl. So as young girls are sexualized at younger and younger ages and adult women increasingly think they need to look like girls in order to be sexy, the boundaries between the two groups is blurring in ways that need to be critiqued.

French philosopher Michela Marzano (2004) has proposed an intriguing theory about the current relationship between people and their bodies that she sees as having been influenced by the aesthetic promoted by pornography. For Marzano the philosophical and sociological questioning about the polarity between the body as a subject or an object has been replaced by the polarity between the body as a whole or as a 'grouping of organs' with the status of a malleable, perfectible object, an ongoing self-improvement project. In Marzano's view, through the analysis of pornography we can see

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<sup>14</sup> See YWCA (2005). Actes de la Journée de réflexion sur la sexualisation précoce, [www.ydesfemmessmtl.org](http://www.ydesfemmessmtl.org)

some of the contemporary paradoxes around bodies and the potential impact of pornography on girls.

Under the illusory appearance of a documentary, classic pornography is actually a highly codified fiction. A fiction that according to Marzano is ruled by a *hyperreal* aesthetic, where men and women are shown as polarities between force and pleasure, activity and passivity, power and availability. In pornography, the body ceases to be a 'person' and becomes the ultimate object. What follows is my free translation from Marzano's original text in French:

We can't recognize any more what is real and the limits of reality, the body and its fragility, the skin and its role as barrier between what constitutes the *outside* and what constitutes the *inside*. Everything is 'taken' and there is no place left for the body as a person. For this reason, we can say that pornography 'enslaves the body and the spirit' of the individual, by dispossessing them of the surprise of discovering their own sexuality. It dehumanizes men and women by the imposition of a model to which they must conform independently of their specificity. Individuals are represented as merchandise enjoying pain and mutilation, as sexual objects that can be tied, cut, mutilated or hurt, as *assemblies of parts and holes* that can be penetrated according to the desire and the taste of the moment. The intimate act itself is at the same time what is simulated and what is being worked on through suffering and manipulation. The body appears to 'enjoy' on the screen, but this is not real since it only happens for and by the spectator. (p. 12)

According to Poulin & Laprade (2006) as well as Bouchard (2007), it is essential that the powerful influence of pornography on children be discussed, because today this powerful industry is defining not only the terms and aesthetics of sexuality but providing children with the very definition of what it means to be a woman or a man.

### **III. Revisiting the Group Narrative**

The goal of this study was to explore how preadolescent girls voiced their feelings about media messages promoting the adoption of sexual personas, in order to address the following research questions: How do preteen girls feel about being bombarded with

sexualized media images? How do they make sense of those images? What mental constructs do they form around the concept of *sexiness*? How might these constructs influence them?

Participants answered the research questions by moving from great discomfort with the bombardment of sexualized images to the pleasures of contesting or condemning these images. They appeared to make sense of media images by enacting a variety of sometimes competing scripts. The girls believed that sexiness was important and “the way” to achieve popularity. Participants also provided us with a grim portrait of their perceptions of gendered relationships, one in which males exert and abuse their power. The issue of girls and power will be further discussed in the following chapter.

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the following meta-narrative synthesizes the participants’ collective perception, what we might call their ‘group think’ around our research questions. The reality of being a preadolescent girl in a sexualized world is a complex one: participants in this study appeared to have bought the media-inculcated notion that to achieve some form of recognition, to be popular; they needed to behave and dress in sexualized ways, like the pop stars. At the same time, there is another parental and cultural script that still tells them that good girls are not sexual and for the participants in this study this script seemed to hold its own. Girls were of multiple minds attempting to synthesize and integrate all the scripts, fed also by the media that are simultaneously telling them: “here is the norm: don’t sleep around, don’t expose your genitals, but to be interesting and sexy, you should transgress the norm and act like a stereotypical *midriff* (blond, dumb and sexy)”.



Although there was a clear awareness among participants that looking sexy and attracting boys could give girls a certain amount of power, the perception these groups of girls had of this power did not strike us as liberating in nature. As Jade, one of my assistants, commented after one of the interviews: “dressing sexy is another way of hiding, the attention goes to what you look like and the *real you* remains safely hidden from view.” The next chapter will look at the implications of these conclusions for further research.

## Chapter V

# FINDINGS, IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE, AND FURTHER RESEARCH

In conclusion to this thesis, this chapter discusses the results of this research, explores their implications for our practice at the Montreal YWCA and points at issues that merit further research.

### **I. Issues for Further Discussion**

#### ***1. Scripted Girlhoods***

As analyzed in the previous chapter, the following meta-narrative synthesizes participants' apparent 'group think' around the research questions:

Good girls are expected to behave in proper ways and avoid transgressing the norms; gendered rules mandate compulsory heterosexuality. Being a girl, 'doing gender', implies that the Body must remain an ongoing project and not carry the burden of fat in order to display an image of sexiness, which is a crucial requirement to achieve popularity. Popularity often involves meanness towards other girls and unpopular boys, but is necessary for attracting alpha boys & men, a surrogate way of achieving power. The instruction codes on how to be sexy are received through the media, particularly in the form of popular music videos and pornography. Looking sexy requires hard work and ultimate might lead to bad relationships, harassment and rape. (p. 70)

Being a preadolescent girl in a hypersexualized world constitutes a complex and conflictive reality. Most participants in this study appeared to adhere to the concept that projecting a sexy image is important, and that in order to be recognized in society a girl needs to be popular, which means dressing and behaving in sexualized ways. While participants took great pleasure in criticizing girls and women who did follow the mandatory *sexiness* script, they also appeared resigned to the inevitability of their perception of reality, reflected in the meta-narrative described above. The girls adhered

simultaneously to differing views as they attempted to integrate and synthesize the different scripted prescriptions of girlhood they receive from various sources. This ambivalence or juggling of conflicting views seems to reflect the contradictions in media messages which tell them: *“here is the norm, don’t sleep around, don’t expose yourself, but if you want to be interesting and sexy, transgress the norm”*. The girls thus seemed to struggle between competing cultural subscripts: *“Good girls don’t”* and *“popular girls do”*. I have labelled their attempts to integrate these scripts into a coherent self: Cultural Script Theory.

## ***2. Sexualization or Sexuality?***

One of the issues leading this research was whether the sexualization of girls was simply taking place at a younger age as a natural consequence of earlier puberty and societal evolution, or if precocity was a phenomenon mostly constructed through the commodification of childhood that has emerged from the strong emphasis on consumerism in late capitalism.

The difference between sexualization and sexuality was discussed in Chapter I and is worth revisiting here; according to the APA (2007) sexualization occurs when a person’s value is based on their appearance or behaviour to the exclusion of other characteristics; when people are held to a standard equating attractiveness with being sexy; when they are seen as objects for other people’s sexual purposes and when sexuality is imposed upon an individual. Not all conditions need to be present for sexualization to occur. Healthy sexuality, on the contrary, involves an intimacy that fosters bonding, mutual respect between consenting partners and shared pleasure, which jointly play an important role in building mental and physical health (Satcher, 2001). In

the light of this perspective, we can conclude that the majority of girls in this study were sexualized since they felt held to narrowly defined standards of beauty equating attractiveness with sexiness and felt sexually objectified by boys and sometimes men. In this cohort, I did not see any evidence of what Satcher (2001) defined as “healthy sexuality”, as well as no mention of pleasure or intimacy; only a vague hinting at media-induced romanticized notions of relationships.

The debate about whether or not sexualization is a problem or simply a natural evolution of sexuality in society has been reflected in some of the literature. Curtis & Hunt (2007), for example, have adopted a ‘natural evolution’ perspective. In the authors’ view, concerns about precocious sexualization centre on potential risks to girls’ identities and *medico-scientific* issues but “there is also an obvious moral dimension that is still engaged with an older, often religious tradition, organized through forms of prohibitions” (p. 8). Curtis & Hunt (2007) have proposed that “public discourse continues to locate adolescent comportment in terms of an earlier set of conditions” (p. 24), discourses they see as a throwback to the 1950’s. Therefore, a critical issue regarding hypersexualization is that once the dominant culture uses sexuality and eroticism to promote consumerism, it becomes very difficult to adopt a political stance that will not be interpreted as moralizing (Turner, 1991). However, in view of the issues raised by this study, discourses that equate preteen girls’ sexual agency with freedom need to be problematized, and views like those of Curtis & Hunt need to be challenged, as I shall argue in the remainder of this chapter.

### ***3. Girls and Agency***

Oppressed women have always exercised agency. Even in the direst conditions such as slavery, people have managed to create for themselves a little sphere of power

and influence. Having the power to influence one's surroundings, even in a small measure, is perhaps essential to human sensibilities. In my perception, Curtis, Hunt and others who endorse similar discourses are missing the point. Girls exercise agency and, in some cases, considerable amounts of power in actively seeking to 'service' boys sexually; so called 'predatory girls', who aggressively seek sexual power, can be found everywhere. This is not new, since sexuality is one of the very few areas where patriarchal societies have allowed women to exercise power. What is really new about this phenomenon is that is affecting girls at a much younger age.

However, sexually promiscuous girls and women have always been condemned in the popular mind and feared for their capacity to humiliate and emasculate boys and men; *evil nymphets* are prominent in the popular imagination as Nabokov's (1955) *Lolita* so skilfully illustrates. A story that even the respected writer Robertson Davies (1959)<sup>15</sup> interpreted as one where a *corrupted child* destroys a *weak adult*, rather than the other way around. The old dichotomy between the virgin and the whore is alive and well, and preteen girls, as we saw in the previous chapter, know it. The girls in Curtis & Hunt's (2007) story, much like the "sexy" girls described by this study's participants, might be displaying agency but aren't what critical theorists and feminists would call "emancipated" in any important sense. The sexually precocious girls Curtis & Hunt (2007) refer to are seeking popularity and the power it confers on its subjects within the *peer economy of status*. However, it would be simplistic to equate power in a space defined and constrained by popular culture and commercial interests with true

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<sup>15</sup> According to an article by C. McGrath, that appeared on the New York Times on September 24, 2005. *50 Years on, 'Lolita' Still Has Power to Unnerve*  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/24/books/24loli.html?pagewanted=print>

emancipation. As Nelson-Kuna & Riger (1995) have proposed, and our observations have confirmed, “the capacity for independent thought and action in the face of hegemonic discourses is problematic” (p. 169) and girls’ agency needs be contextualized in view of their subordinate status in society.

Gilligan (1982) has proposed that “relatedness” is as an essential concept if we are to understand women’s actions. According to Nelson-Kuna & Riger (1995), Parsons (1952) has formulated a useful distinction between two forms of agency: instrumental and expressive actions. While instrumental activity focuses on accomplishment and achievement outside of the social group and is usually associated with autonomy and males, expressive activity is oriented towards internal group interactions and can be seen as a function of women’s *relatedness*. Instrumental and expressive activities thus constitute two distinctive realms of action, which are not equally valued in society and are the source of much stereotyping for both men and women. However, as Unger (1990) has proposed, gendered behaviour usually emerges in response to the demands of the situation and relatedness and autonomy can be seen as tributaries of how one is positioned in the social hierarchy. While those in higher positions can invoke rationality for their actions, those in the lower positions will tend to emphasize relatedness (Hare-Mustin & Maracek, 1986). Interwoven patterns of inequality form a “matrix of domination” (Collins, 1990), where people are positioned according to advantages and disadvantages and may be privileged or not depending on where they are situated within the continuum of equality and inequality. Participants in this study were all at a disadvantage due to their gender, age, class, and linguistic minority status, and for most of them, also because of their race.

Girls' agency needs to be unpacked further since relatedness is often conflated in the popular imagination with women's presumed innate function as society's "care-givers". The girls in the example provided by Curtis & Hunt (2007) appeared to be functioning within a relatedness paradigm as they adapted to the rules of their school's *peer-economy of status*. In a sense, they were also acting as "care-givers", as they voluntarily provided sexually servicing to the alpha boys without getting anything in return from them. Sexualized girls today are thus functioning within the same old feminine paradigm of "selfless caring" but without reaping the benefits, such as societal protection, that women used to get. To make matters worse, studies such as Lamb's (2002) have proposed that when girls focus prematurely on what men want, they do not get the chance to explore their own sensuality and what gives them pleasure; building their identity on *relatedness* before getting a chance to do so based on their own needs. It is therefore important to question what kinds of opportunity for agency a hypersexualized society offers to girls, marginalized girls in particular?

Projecting a *sexy image* and behaving in sexualized ways is perhaps, as my research-assistant Jade indicated, just a strategy that some girls use to seek power while hiding what they feel is their *real selves*. The marginalized girls we work with, appear to use a number of such strategies in order to protect and hide themselves: showing 'attitude', resorting to a 'tough girl' stance, dressing like boys or with baggy clothes, and attempting to be so quiet that they can disappear into the background. These strategies constitute forms of resistance to the norm, although in our professional observation some inner turmoil often appears to accompany their use, rather than a display of self-affirmation and inner confidence. Further research will be needed to explore the

relationship between girls' needs and the strategies they use to satisfy them and whether those strategies are located within the relatedness/care-giving paradigm.

All human needs are good and legitimate, but not all the strategies we use to satisfy our needs promote our well being. Chilean economist Max-Neef's (1987) has developed a framework for understanding human needs, which he identified as *few, finite* and *classifiable*. His conception of "needs" is the antithesis of the economic perspective that focuses on human *wants*, which are *infinite* and *insatiable*; a perspective that serves to justify the postulate that unlimited economic growth is both possible and desirable. Max-Neef proposes that there is no hierarchy of needs. Perhaps his most important contribution to the understanding of needs is the distinction he makes between *needs* and *satisfiers*: satisfiers can be positive or negative since by satisfying one particular need, they might inhibit or destroy another, *synergic satisfiers* -for their part- lead to satisfaction in other areas of one's life. Everyone needs to feel, regardless of age, that she or he can have an influence and that one's contribution has some kind of impact on the immediate environment. Without a personal space of recognition, as John S. Mills<sup>16</sup> (1869) has proposed, women will seek to fulfill their power needs through men and might resort to pettiness. For some girls today this appears to translate into attempting to gain popularity through sexiness, acting mean towards other girls and less desirable boys, and the sexual servicing of popular boys.

Throughout history, girls and women's lives have been shaped by beliefs that are invariably at the service of some religious, political or economic ideology; the construct of the "selfless care giver" being a good example. Girls today are led to believe that they *can* have power, girl power, yet this power remains mostly elusive and continues to be

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<sup>16</sup> See reference: Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy (n.d.)



circumscribed to their sexuality which is mostly defined by male needs. Whereas traditionally, only *bad* girls could use the power of their sexuality, today popular culture tells all girls that they should use theirs but condemns them if they do; as the participants in this research summed it up: *they ask us why we don't dress sexy and if we do they will call us some names*. The power of *sexiness* -as defined by current standards- is a mirage; a mirage that might encourage girls to sexualize prematurely, ignore their own needs and numb their bodies to internal body cues in order to live up to a commercialized prescription of girlhood.

## **II. Implications for Practice**

### ***1. Working with Girls: Bodies, Beauty Norms, and the Media***

As I have explored throughout this thesis, in the twenty-first century preteen girls appear caught up in a paradox of competing cultural scripts. They live in a world of *simulacra* where neither adults nor children know for sure what is real and what is not. Moreover, they are continuously being enticed and seduced into dreams of stardom and specialness. Their growing bodies are the battleground where most of the discourses and counter-discourses are centred. Their bodies are self-perceived as vehicles for achieving popularity and influence, although the quest to perfect them according to externally defined norms can result in self-loathing and self-harm. For many girls, appearances define their identity as they are indoctrinated into imitating popular culture icons, even when they find their idols' dress and gestures inappropriate. Today some preteen girls also experience very important biological changes before they are emotionally ready for them, while receiving pressure from their peers and the media to conform to certain ideals and standards of beauty and behaviour. Finally, parents and researchers debate

about them, and society subjects them to various forms of exclusion, domination and violence due not only to their class and race but also because of the capitalist lust for accumulation and patriarchal expectations placed upon all females.

As activists, my colleagues and I attempt to promote girls' self-understanding and self-esteem and encourage them to become highly critical of the fake promises and misleading messages society attempts to sell them. However, as we saw in Chapter IV, most of the girls we interviewed were already very critical of the messages they receive. Unfortunately, they also appeared resigned to a certain perception of reality and to feel powerless to change it. They had normalized the idea of being sexual objects and the legitimate subjects of some forms of violence; they perceived this as a *necessary evil* to endure in order to get more recognition in their lives. Ready for sex or not, the manipulation of their sexuality appeared to be perceived as the only available pathway to access power.

Participants in this study demonstrated a considerable amount of agency and pleasure in critiquing the message, and many of them may have also felt entitled to resist by not seeking the path of *sexiness*. However, this 'choice' did not appear to come from a position of strength. It seemed as if the only *real choices* they felt they had, particularly the older girls, were situated somewhere between: a) accepting that they were going to be ignored if they refused to dress or act sexy and, b) realizing the need to engage in the many practices leading to the display of a sexual persona if they wanted a certain popularity. Moreover, since most of the participants could never live up to the standards of beauty proposed by the media, they were even more limited in their choices, their self-

esteem undermined by norms they know they will fail; it is therefore not surprising that they expressed feelings of powerlessness.

The issue of sexualization and power raises important considerations for those who work with girls; it signals that we need to help girls move beyond the critique of the message towards understanding that there are other choices and options on how to become a woman and exercise power in one's life. Girls in this study wanted to believe this, as illustrated by their disappointment at concluding that all pop artists followed a cookie-cutter image construction. They appeared to be thirsting for alternative models, seeking more dignified and comfortable beliefs to carry them through the difficult negotiation of identity awaiting them in adolescence.

## ***2. Age and the Re-writing of Scripts***

The older girls we interviewed appeared to have lost their compassion for others and to feel powerless to change the situation they found themselves in, which might reflect feelings of being externally controlled (having little power over events in one's life) and diminished hope. However, most of the younger girls appeared to believe that they had more choices in life and seemed to be more compassionate and understanding of other people's shortcomings. As social activists we thrive on hope and these observations contain a kernel of possibility for change; they signal the importance of working with younger girls before they lose their sense of empowerment and 'harden up', as well as the need to offer all girls alternative models of girlhood and womanhood. Therefore, more work needs to be done to find effective ways to empower girls and help them subvert the dominant scripts of hypersexuality.

### ***3. Understanding Power in Girls' Lives***

However, is it really possible to empower others? And if so, what does this mean? In its more prevalent form, power is defined by a hierarchy, which gives control to those who are on top. This type of power is frequently enforced through overt and covert violence and fear, and most human beings have it so internalized that it is habitually self-imposed. As we saw in Chapter II, we often become active agents in our subjugation, both prisoners and guards; but power can also be analyzed through a different lens. Townsend et al. (1999) have suggested that there are other forms of power besides **power over**, and they propose the following categories:

- **Self-empowerment:** only the power that we take for ourselves belongs to us since if someone 'gives' it to us, it can be taken away. However, self-empowerment is not a product but a process;
- **Power from within:** this form of power arises from the acknowledgement of our strength and the uniqueness of our humanity; it is based on self-respect and self-acceptance that can be extended to others we see as our equals; power from within is the basis of empowerment;
- **Power with:** can be defined as the capacity to achieve with others what cannot be achieved alone, it involves the awareness that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts;
- **Power to:** involves the possibility of exploring and gaining access to a wide range of innate and learned abilities and of actualizing one's potential;

- **Power as resistance:** this is the type of power that counterbalances power over: oppressed peoples everywhere have developed a variety of means of resisting and subjugated women have turned it into an art.

There is a lot more to power than what contemporary girls are led to believe. The girls we interviewed were skilful at using power as resistance. Through our work with them we hope to lead them towards the possibilities contained in the other forms. The challenge is to help girls understand that the power that comes from within can be exercised in a variety of healthy ways, and that this form of power is more satisfying than the power found in commercially defined spaces and projects.

In Chapter II I have analyzed two main feminist perspectives around girls and power. In the first one, girls' power and agency were seen as constricted by systemic forces; in the second, girls' agency and power of resistance was emphasized. Bordo (1993) has proposed that both perspectives are important in providing a complete theoretical understanding of power in relation to girls' and women's bodies. As practitioners we need to see how all of the above perspectives can be integrated in our work or discourses, and which one of them is able to provide greater insights into the specific historical situation of the girls we work with.

#### ***4. Our Work with Adults: Fostering Family Resilience***

There are also a number of implications in this study for our work as adult educators. As mentioned in Chapter I, my work with parents and other adults working with children has signalled that they often feel lost and confused, not knowing where the boundaries of sexual propriety lie, insecure about their role as adults and their capacity to influence children and their choices; dubious of their ability to offer a framework that

will allow their children or the children under their care to navigate media bombardment and peer pressure. This is not coincidental, and any careful observation of how advertising portrays adults will indicate how intentionally disempowering marketing strategies can be (Schor, 2004). This study underlines the need to impress upon adults the importance of being very present in girls' lives and maintaining an ongoing dialogue. We should encourage parents and other significant adults to identify the human values guiding their lives and share them with the children under their care. We need to foster children's self-esteem, not in a Pollyanna sort of way, where everything goes, but in realistic ways that highlight girls' skills and competencies that are not exclusively based on appearance.

This does not necessarily require dramatic shifts but simple gestures; for example, as writer Miriam Weinstein (2005) has suggested, many families do not eat together anymore. Weinstein has highlighted research carried out at Emory University (Duke et al., 2003), which examined how family rituals fostered children's rootedness and contributed to their emotional stability and resilience. Emory's multidisciplinary research-group, found that family meals create an ideal space for the transmission of family stories and values, which serves to promote in children a sense of security and belonging. This effect was observed even in dysfunctional families, where mental health outcomes for individual members were improved if the family was capable of maintaining some rituals and routines. In Duke's et al. (2003) research, which was carried out with working-class families, knowing stories about one's family had a highly positive correlation with family functioning, children's self esteem, and feelings of not being externally controlled. As human beings we need to belong and belonging gives us

security, which serves to protect us from the difficulties of life. When people eat alone in front of the computer or the television, reality can be replaced by the fantasy and simulation proposed by the media, which ultimately leaves us feeling insecure. The media are acting as scriptwriters and adults need to guide girls in imagining and exploring positive alternatives.

### **III. Further Research**

In this study, a number of issues were identified that point to the need for further research; one of them is how to conciliate girls' passion for hip-hop music with the potential negative impact of degrading lyrics, their discontent about musicians' behaviour and the stereotypical portrayal of men and women in music videos. According to Clay (2003), hip-hop music is a social currency among Black youth, and girls in our study were obviously torn between racial pride about the music and repulsion by the overt sexuality of the imagery. As we saw in Chapter IV, while males in these videos are portrayed as dominant, sexually aggressive and adventurous (Arnett, 2002), women are portrayed as decorative objects whose function is to please and entice men while wearing revealing and provocative clothing and dancing in sexualized ways (Andsager & Roe, 1999). A number of studies have indicated that stereotypical sexualized images have an important impact on shaping children's identity. According to Martino et al. (2006) exposure to degrading and violent music lyrics encourages sexual precocity and other unhealthy behaviours in young teens, and as we have seen, provoke profound inner conflict in girls.

Another issue that merits further research is sexual harassment in schools. In a cultural climate that objectifies and sexualizes girls, it is hardly surprising that sexual

harassment does not appear to be an isolated incident. The girls mentioned children they knew who were harassed on a regular basis. Participants in other girls' groups within the national YWCA network also report ongoing harassment from boys starting in elementary school. It appears that this phenomenon is rather prevalent.

The following quote by Brown (2008), from a recent interview with a group of girls participating at the local YWCA activities, illustrates the situation in Toronto:

They can get grabbed on the breast or the backside at any time in the halls. They hear girls being called "skank," "ho" or "slut" every day at school. Every day, sometimes from other girls. And with sad regularity, they hear guys yell out which part of the male anatomy they want them to suck. "Guys always say that – it's disgusting, but a lot of girls laugh it off," says 16-year-old student Megan Brownlee. "I'm shocked when girls don't get mad, because deep inside, you know the guys don't respect you."

Unfortunately, many forms of violence are increasingly being normalized and glorified in the media and this is reflecting in young people's behaviour. We saw in Chapter IV how 10 year-old Deepa referred to most of the artists portrayed in the pictures we showed them as 'hos' and 'sluts'. This language appears to be common currency, not only in how boys address girls but also in how girls address each other in the schools we work with. According to the adults I have met throughout Quebec, this phenomenon is also taking place in their schools. One of the issues is that violence is not only being normalized to the point of not registering as such in people's minds, but also that it is usually defined in narrow ways. Participants in our girl-groups at the YWCA speak of violence when someone has been hit or shot, although many other forms of violence exist. Interpersonal violence, particularly in the form of spousal sexual, verbal, psychological and economic abuse, has widely been explored by women's organizations



working on family violence. At the Montreal YWCA<sup>17</sup> we use a framework that distinguishes self-inflicted, interpersonal, collective and systemic violence, which can be exercised socially, politically, economically and symbolically. There are many potential links between violence and precocious sexualization and this relationship begs to be explored in some future research.

A final question that requires further research pertains to girls and the submission to normative beauty practices. Is the transition from rejection to acceptance of these practices that usually takes place in early adolescence, a product of female domestication into gender norms, and a final colonization of girls' spirit into submission to patriarchal and capitalist requirements? As expressed in Chapter IV, although most of the girls in this study seemed to be aware of and mostly critical of the pressures to conform to normative beauty practices, there is no guaranteeing that they will maintain or act on their critique. The pre-teen years situate them on the edge, resisting but also becoming increasingly socialized and indoctrinated, poised to join, perhaps with reluctance, the older girls and stars who work like crazy to meet standards of sexiness and beauty that are almost impossible to achieve.

#### **IV. Concluding Remarks**

The research questions guiding this study were: How do preteen girls feel about being bombarded with sexualized media images? How do they make sense of those images? What mental constructs do they form around the concept of *sexiness*? How might these constructs influence them? As we have seen in Chapter IV, participants generously answered these questions and many more, but for every question answered many new questions arose.

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<sup>17</sup> See Goldfarb (2006)

We have explored from various angles the impact the media have on precocious sexualization and we can glean in whose interests the debates are being framed. Because we deeply care for girls' well being, our activist strategies need to be planned carefully. It is essential that we show girls the positive female role models that exist, as well as models of healthy interpersonal relationships. We need to acknowledge and support girls' agency and help them find positive ways to satisfy their need for acknowledgement and recognition, while also exploring with them the asymmetry of the power relations they are in. Ultimately, girls' best interests will be served when we can collectively create the conditions for them to feel free to explore their sexuality, on their own terms and when they are ready for it. Only this will serve an emancipatory goal.

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## **Appendix A**



Lilia Goldfarb  
YWCA Montreal and  
School of Graduate Studies Concordia University

### **Consent Form to participate in the project: Girls and the media**

Hi! I work at the YWCA Montreal. I am doing an interesting study about girls and the media. The study will help the YWCA develop new programs for girls that we can offer at your community center or school. I am also a student at the School of Graduate Studies at Concordia University where I am writing a Masters thesis. I am looking for volunteers at your community center to participate in my project. I am hoping to discover what you think of or learn when you look at the media - including T.V., music videos, fashion magazines, video games, movies and advertising. The project will not take a lot of your time.

If you agree to join this project, you will participate in 2 group discussions (over pizza!), here at the community center, with other girls your age. In the fall, we will invite you to participate in a follow-up activity. The discussions will be about how girls are presented in the media and how you think this might affect your life and the lives of other girls your age. I will be taping these group discussions so I can study them later on. With your permission, I will also take notes on our project.

All the information you give during this project will be confidential; that means that only the people who are here know who you are, no one else will be able to identify you later by what you shared. Your real name will not be used in anything I write and I will not reveal the names of your community center or school. You can easily stop participating in the project if you change your mind and you can leave the group at any time during discussions and talk to (*name of community center's counselor*). There is no pressure to talk if you do not want to - it is completely up to you and what you feel comfortable saying.

I will need the consent of one of your parents or guardians before we start, so I need you to bring a consent form home for them to sign and to give it back to (*name of community center's counselor*) before you can participate. If you decide not to participate or to stop participating, there won't be any consequences to the activities you do at the community center or with the YWCA, so please don't worry. The tape will be destroyed after the project and your name and the name of the community center will not appear anywhere. I would like you to invent a name for yourself that I can use when I refer to what you have said in the papers I will write. We will do our best to make this fun and informative for you. I look forward to your participation!

If you have any questions please don't hesitate to call or e-mail me at,  
\_\_\_\_\_, or at \_\_\_\_\_

**If you check "yes" on the part below, it means you have decided to participate and have read and understood this consent form. You and your parents will be given a copy of this form to keep. You will also be invited to a meeting after the research is completed.**

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes, I would like to participate  
\_\_\_\_\_ No, I do not want to participate

\_\_\_\_\_  
Your real name and signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name you would like me to use

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Lilia Goldfarb  
Department Head Leadership Services YWCA Montreal, and  
School of Graduate Studies Concordia University

**Parent/Guardian Consent Form**  
**Participation in a study about Girls and the Media**

**Dear Parent(s), Guardian,**

My name is Lilia Goldfarb; I work at the YWCA Montreal where I am responsible for developing and managing girls' programs. I am also writing a thesis for my studies at the School of Graduate Studies at Concordia University. Please take a moment to read this document carefully. It will help you decide whether or not you would like your daughter to participate in this project. Please feel free to ask as many questions as you would like, my contact information is written above. I think this project will be enjoyable for the girls participating.

**General purpose of the project**

Through this study I am interested in understanding how girls (9 to 11 years old), feel about the pressures in our society, especially from the media, to grow up quickly and dress and behave in provocative ways. At the YWCA we have been offering programs for girls for many years; the information gathered in this study will be used to develop programs for younger girls that are appropriate for their needs. The information will also be analyzed for my Masters thesis at Concordia University.

**Your daughter's participation in this project**

If you agree, your daughter will participate in two informal discussion groups at the (name) community center with other girls her age. The discussions will last approximately 1-1/2 hours each and we will provide food and drink. Your daughter will be asked to think about how media influences her life and choices and the lives of other girls her age through TV programs, fashion magazines, music videos, and advertising. Because of their age, we will ask simple questions on subjects that girls already talk about. We will only use their own words and try to find out what those words mean to them.

A young woman who facilitates girls' groups for the YWCA will facilitate this discussion. I will be part of the discussion group, observe and take notes; I will listen to the tape afterwards to identify the themes girls' talk about and the words they use. In the fall, we will be organizing a follow-up activity and group discussion with girls and parents to share the results, see if this study has affected your child's awareness or if any changes have occurred because of her participation. We will also tell you about the programs we will be developing based on this study and how your daughter could benefit from them. If you want, you can receive at that time a copy of the study's written report.

**For your daughter's protection and your ease:**

- Participation is completely **voluntary** and only the girls who have a **signed** parent consent form will be included in the project.
- If you do not want your daughter to participate, this will not affect your daughter's present or future relationship with the YWCA or with the (name) community center.
- Your daughter is free to withdraw or abstain from the group discussion any time she wants. If she withdraws, (name), the community center's counselor, will be there for her.

- You may ask questions at any time. Should you change your mind, you are entitled to ask that all the information concerning your daughter be removed from the project before it is completed.
- The information obtained during this project will be kept strictly confidential. The discussions will be audio taped; however, only those involved in the project will hear them and the tapes will be destroyed after the study is over.
- Since it is to the girls' advantage to protect each other's identities, we will encourage them to do so every step of the process.
- There are no risks involved in this study that are not there in everyday life.
- The results of this study will be used to develop new programs for young girls at the YWCA and might be published, but I will never use any names or information that could identify your child, her community center or the school she attends.

If at any time you have questions or concerns about this study, you can contact my thesis supervisor, Dr. Sandra Weber at Concordia's Education Department: [Sandra.weber@education.concordia.ca](mailto:Sandra.weber@education.concordia.ca) or Adela Reid, Compliance Officer, Concordia University, at 514.848.2424, x.7481 or by email at [Adela.Reid@Concordia.ca](mailto:Adela.Reid@Concordia.ca).

**I HAVE CAREFULLY STUDIED THE INFORMATION PROVIDED AND UNDERSTAND THIS AGREEMENT. I FREELY CONSENT AND VOLUNTARILY AGREE FOR MY DAUGHTER TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.**

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes, I would like my child to participate in the study. I understand the results might be published but that her identity will be protected at all times. I also understand that I am entitled to change my mind.

\_\_\_\_\_ No, I do not want my child to participate in this study

Child's name \_\_\_\_\_

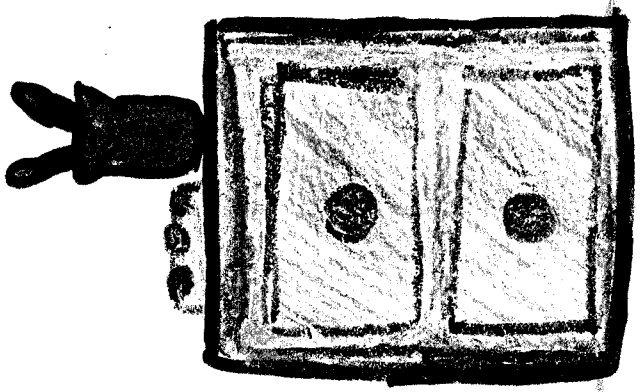
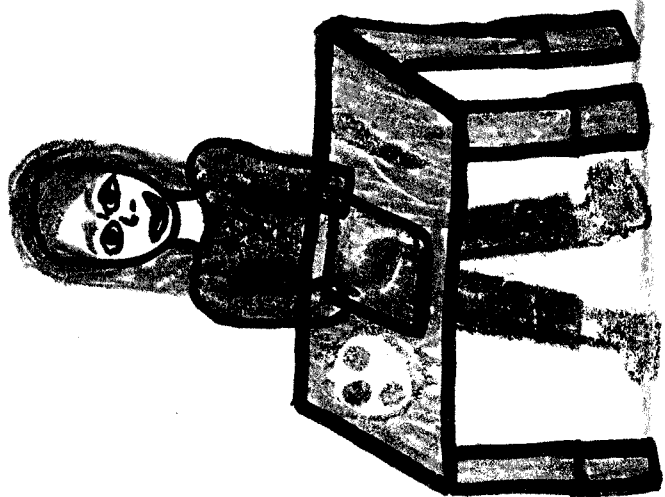
Parent/Guardian name \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone \_\_\_\_\_

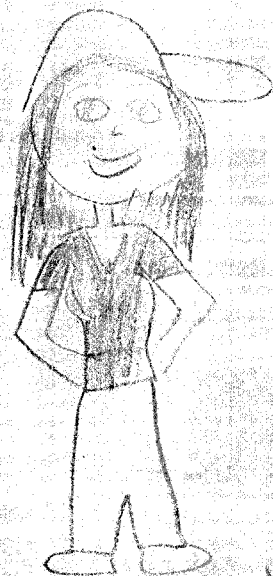
\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature Date

## **Appendix B**

# Artist







I will be in University and a actress and  
a Fashion designer and a techlogia

A 29011



I want to be a  
Store  
owner

