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Marie Celestin

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EMPOWERING AND ENGAGING TEEN GIRLS THROUGH MEDIA FROM THE  
PERSPECTIVE OF A PRACTITIONER AND PRODUCER

A Synthesis Project Presented

by

MARIE CELESTIN

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies, University of Massachusetts Boston,  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

June 2011

Critical and Creative Thinking Program

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## ABSTRACT

### EMPOWERING AND ENGAGING TEEN GIRLS THROUGH MEDIA FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF A PRACTITIONER AND PRODUCER

June 2011

Marie Celestin  
M.A., University of Massachusetts Boston

Directed by Associate Professor Arthur Millman

Mainstream media plays an important part of our lives. For teens today, often labeled the “digital generation,” media sources affect the way they read, understand, and interpret information and are a critical influence on the way they see themselves. I have been a media critic since I was a teenager, but the Critical and Creative Thinking program allowed me to articulate my vision for a fairer representation of women and girls while tapping in my creative toolbox to produce original and bolder images of real girls through the G.I.R.L.S. (Growing Individuals Reacting to Life's Struggles) Project and GIRL TV—in short, to combine criticism with change. In this synthesis paper I describe the G.I.R.L.S. Project and GIRL TV, which engage teens in dialogue about how girls are negatively portrayed, provide a role for girls in media production, and show how that role allows them to develop the critical thinking skills necessary to cultivate a healthy self-image, despite formidable challenges. I provide a review of relevant literature about the importance of media critique, including the groundbreaking work of Carol Gilligan and Diane Levin on adolescent development, socialization and media

consumption. I convey the process and outcomes of conducting interviews with teens in the text and in a short video—<http://blip.tv/file/4449525>—that also illustrates a new skill set that I have developed. The synthesis paper concludes with a reflective note on my growth as a collaborative leader and emerging media producer.

*dedication*

Thank you to the CCT faculty for their guidance. I appreciate my peers for their encouragement throughout the program.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Reflective practice is "the capacity to reflect on action so as to engage in a process of continuous learning..."<sup>1</sup>

The media plays an important part in teens' lives--they watch television, listen to music, surf the internet, interact with social media, text on their cell phones, play video games, and read magazines practically every day. It is estimated that teens spend more hours interacting with all forms of media than any other activity, including attending school. Their school performance and participation in extra curricular activities may be negatively impacted by excessive media consumption. Therefore, it should be a significant area of inquiry in the field of education and critical thinking.

The synthesis project provides some new insights and tools for after school practitioners, teachers and parents, particularly those working with adolescent girls in after school settings. Parents also need to become more knowledgeable about what their children are watching, reading, listening to, surfing and how they're interacting with social media and with whom. The last chapter showcases the rationale for focusing on mainstream media and the main reasons this subject is at the core of the synthesis project.

I've been a media critic since I was a teenager, but the Critical and Creative Thinking (CCT) program allowed me to articulate my vision for a fairer representation of women and girls while tapping in my creative toolbox to produce original and bolder images of real girls through

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<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reflective\\_practice#cite\\_note-0](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reflective_practice#cite_note-0)

the G.I.R.L.S. (Growing Individuals Reacting to Life's Struggles) Project—in short, to combine criticism with change. One of the courses that truly made an impact on my journey was the reflective practice seminar. It was the first time in years that I thought deeply about why I founded a volunteer based organization with young women in my community. I had a chance to reflect on what's working and areas where we can improve. I also began to ask key questions to our members about they enjoy about the organization and what they envision five years from now.

In the midst of daily activities, reflection can easily be put on the back burner. The truth is there are many days when I barely take time to breathe and prioritize my to do list. As a result, reflection becomes an unfortunate inconvenience or after thought. Intellectually, I understand the lasting benefits of reflection and its potential impact on my practice. I still dread it when it's required. It's not enough to know what to do but to develop the skills to apply it most of the time. However, reflection in CCT has allowed me to take a closer and deeper look at my work while envisioning my future as a scholar-practitioner, media maker, critic and consumer. Furthermore, I have been laying out the groundwork to strengthen the G.I.R.L.S. Project and its programs.

Although this was a process that was cultivated through my courses, I'm now working on conducting future strategic gatherings to cultivate deeper dialogues about our best practices and ways to sustain our vision with transformative actions. In essence, the synthesis project became a unique venue to further reflect on my development and highlight the evolution of the G.I.R.L.S. Project as while I rediscover my creative self. As the Director of the organization and producer of the television program, I have focused on guiding the teens behind the camera and sometimes as on air talent. I had never described my work as creative until now. In the last year, I have learned new editing programs and taken more studio training to build a foundation that goes

beyond media analysis and critique. In order to offer an alternative and become a better role model, I had challenged myself and ventured into areas that I would typically avoid. I now see video editing, as a creative outlet to share various community projects that I'm working on that cannot be illustrated solely in print.

One of the most rewarding aspects of my journey has been working with various Critical and Creative Thinking students and alumni. The first interview where I had an opportunity to practice my editing skills and field production was with an artist who graduated from the program. I managed all aspects of the shoot except videography and ultimately, edit the final video to sharing it with the public. I shared these examples to illustrate that my development spilled outside the classroom and was encouraged by my peers during my learning curves. It is rare to apply one's learning simultaneously as I develop a theoretical framework to ground my work as a practitioner. In many settings, this would be irrelevant and overlooked as a meaningful part of my journey as it does not fit neatly in academia. The synthesis brings my practice and academic learning to full circle as it illustrates my new skill set in a short video—

<http://blip.tv/file/4449525>—that complements my written project. The remainder of the synthesis will be dedicated to a description of the G.I.R.L.S. Project and GIRL TV (chapter 1), a review of relevant literature about the importance of media critique (chapter 2), and the process of conducting interviews with teens (chapter 3). A reflective note concludes the synthesis paper.

## **What Is The G.I.R.L.S. Project?**

The mission of the G.I.R.L.S. Project is to connect our voices and resources to create social change in our communities. It is to create a comfortable space for girls of all ages to express themselves, learn leadership skills, and make allies. In addition to a safe space, teen girls a chance to speak out and be heard, to learn from their peers, and to formulate solutions to the problems in their lives. The programs are designed to engage, educate, and prepare young women to be effective leaders and media makers. The G.I.R.L.S. Project's goals are first and foremost defined by a core group of young women who have invested their time into the project.

These goals are:

- Increase public awareness about girls' needs and issues
- Celebrate girls' achievements and honor youth leaders
- Build partnerships with other organizations and individuals
- Create a platform for action from a girl's perspective
- Organize on-going quality programs for girls and young women to develop their potential

At its fullest potential, the project is developing today's emerging leaders and the next generation of women leaders by enabling them to:

- Have a meaningful forum to discuss compelling issues as a basis for action
- Learn leadership and marketable skills
- Life Skills: decision-making, peaceful conflict resolution, adoption of healthy practices

- “Hard” Skills: public speaking, writing, researching, interviewing, software usage, new media technology (cameras, lighting, sound, etc.), project planning, meeting facilitation
- Take on role of decision-maker and expert (they decide issues of discussion for the show, invite the guests and conduct the live interviews)

Let me first discuss the need of developing girls into leaders, then describe an important component of the G.I.R.L.S. Project, namely, GIRL TV.

### **The Need For Developing Young Women Leaders**

Too often, young women and girls are seen or portrayed as victims in our society. Their talents and strengths are not valued or recognized. They are rarely viewed as effective leaders with the abilities to organize and create social change in their communities. Even more tragic, young women may grow to share this view of themselves with serious negative consequences for their personal growth as well as our society. Girls are often tokenized in many programs that are created to build their self-esteem. Their ideas are often noted, but those who are “in charge” rarely relinquish their power for girls to have meaningful ownership of the programs. The G.I.R.L.S. Project consistently develops avenues for girls to exercise their power in different settings. We’ve shared our model of collaborative leadership within our networks and community at large, and internally by passing the torch to young women activists who are part of our leadership and media programs.

One of our signature programs is the annual G.I.R.L.S. Conference held in the city of Boston, open to high school aged girls. It is a springboard from which ideas are introduced and implemented by girls and young women in the organization. The conference serves to assess the needs of young women in our program and the community at large. Young women are recruited from this conference for their ideas, concerns and interest in learning new skills. The GIRL TV

Leadership Crew then plans a seasonal Young Women's Leadership Institute (itself created based on G.I.R.L.S. Conference demands), and, on a weekly basis, produces GIRL TV according to the needs and issues reported by conference participants and members of the G.I.R.L.S. Project.

In March 2001, members of the G.I.R.L.S. Project participated, along with 200 girls and other organizations, in a Boston Public Hearing on Girls' Issues, sponsored by the Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women. A survey of 87 girls and organizations taken at the hearing revealed that the issues that were most important to young women in Boston were (top 6 issues):

- 18.4% Violence Against Women
- 16.5% Teen Pregnancy/Sex Education/HIV Prevention
- 13.4% Developing Leadership/Mentoring
- 10.7% Body Image/Eating Disorders
- 10.7% After-School Programs
- 10.3% Education and Career Planning (Source: Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women, 2001)

The G.I.R.L.S. Project is committed to providing leadership development during out-of-school hours, a time period when it is critical that teens are engaged in structured activities.

What is unique about the program is that leadership development training is applied to the specific purpose of raising awareness and mobilizing action around the other issues of importance. Violence against women, body image/eating disorders, and education and career planning are regular G.I.R.L.S. Project training topics. Teen pregnancy/Sex Education/HIV prevention are addressed through topics, which raise awareness about self-esteem and self-respect.

Although, leadership development is in demand, a survey of 61 programs *specifically serving girls* in Greater Boston shows that 42 organizations serve the same age group as the G.I.R.L.S. Project. However, only 6 of those 42 organizations specifically provide leadership

development training. Seven organizations provide counseling, 12 provide recreational activities (including sports and arts), 8 specifically provide sports/arts programs, 8 provide science/math programs, and a few specialize in career counseling (Boston School Age Child Care Project, July, 6, 2001). Although this is by no means a comprehensive list of services for young women in Boston, it is a good sample of the range of programs available for young women.

### **GIRL TV: A Local Alternative to MTV**

GIRL TV, *at a minimum*, provides an outlet for girls to express themselves in structured leadership activities during out-of-school time. Participants disseminate useful information, learn a variety of skills by producing and hosting the show, and have a chance to network and connect with groups for community service, after-school jobs and public service. By creating an alternative media option, girls who participate in GIRL TV become media literate, challenging the media images that they are exposed to daily and delving into the social and political implications of these images. Because GIRL TV presents a diverse group of girls who are informative and who convey their ideas with confidence, our viewers and the community see positive and realistic images of young women.

GIRL TV is in a powerful position to reach out to young women and to provide them with accurate information. The show explores real-world issues and provides an outlet for young women to become informed, share their concerns, and offer solutions. Past topics include: teen dating violence, fitness, mental health, teen/parent communications, eating disorders, body image, technology, sexual harassment and more. In addition to informing viewers, the creation of the show was influenced by the need to expose girls to strong and positive images of women locally and globally. I recognize the scarcity of female leaders, both girls and women, on

mainstream television that are making a positive impact in their communities. I was driven by a sense of frustrations and disappointment by the invisibility of diverse positive role models for girls I work with but also in various positions. It was important that they reflect the population that I work with but also willing to share their real self with the participants. These people must comfortable sharing their personal stories without talking down or lecturing. They must be able to interact with the teens while discussing how various aspects of their professional and personal lives.

For example, at the recent conference, our keynote address was delivered by the first African-American female councilor in the city of Boston. Members of the G.I.R.L.S. Project describe her as “real” because she spoke simply and eloquently about her upbringing and the reasons she ran for public office. She also gave clear examples of challenges she faced growing up and how she made decisions as an individual and a leader advocating for many issues affecting her community. In addition to witnessing her speak, I know that she made an invaluable impact by attending the conference because the girls told me directly and later openly shared their views about their participation live on the television show with an audience who may or may not have attended the conference.

GIRL TV and the G.I.R.L.S. Conference became a collective avenue where I can bring these women and girls to the forefront to share their personal and professional stories of success and struggles. I made it part of my mission to search, find and connect with these women and young women in my communities through networking and sometimes by accident. GIRL TV members are responsible for planning and implementing programs and the members of the show develop both “hard” and “soft” skills through their initiative taking. GIRL TV is essential to our goals as it provides the platform for disseminating and sharing ideas, and forging solutions. Our



approach is multi-pronged, including:

1. Participation of young women in the planning process (GIRL TV Crew)
2. Leadership development through technical training (GIRL TV media training)
3. Creation of an influential alternative medium for young women's ideas and actions (GIRL TV broadcasts)

G.I.R.L.S. Project participants receive extensive leadership development and media literacy training for high school students. Through GIRL TV's collaboration with local organizations, schools and other agencies, our program utilizes connections within our community networks and young women to recruit girls for media training. Our volunteers and interns provide the technical skills for young women to learn the ropes of journalistic skills and media production, and rely on the G.I.R.L.S. Project to facilitate young women's access to the program.

One of the first sets of skills that girls learn through GIRL TV is media literacy. They become literate by developing "the ability to: access, analyze, evaluate and produce a variety of media. Girls also learn critical thinking skills by practicing how to identify and challenge assumptions which is an essential CT component. Last, girls also become "reflectively skeptical." In *Developing Critical Thinkers*, Stephen D. Brookfield (1991) affirms "People who are reflectively skeptical do not take things as read (p.9)." By being reflectively skeptical, girls can also question what they watch, read and listen to. This critical thinking skill is the perfect fit for teens analyzing and producing original media. If exposed to critical thinking principles at an early age or even during adolescence, it provides a foundation to begin exploring how one's think and view the world around them. GIRL TV is in a unique position to instill these skills

through formal training, dialogue and applied knowledge through media production.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The opening paragraph of the synthesis conveyed that the topic of media critique is important to me as a practitioner and scholar. Why focus on mainstream media, particularly images of girls and women, when there are many other social issues plaguing teens in our world? Mary Pipher shares some of my sentiments and frustrations about the degradation of girls in American culture. She states:

As I looked at the culture that girls enter as they come of age, I was struck by what a poisoning culture it was. The more I looked around, the more I listened to today's music, watched television, and movies and looked at sexist advertising, the more convinced I became that we are on the wrong path with our daughters. America today limits girls' development, truncates their wholeness and leaves many of them traumatized (p.12).

Media matters now more than ever because our world has shifted where everything teens do and experience is influenced by the visual messages and images they're exposed to and interact with. No one is exempt from media exposure and influence, from children to youth and adults. Mass media is the language of contemporary youth, both girls and boys. They're immersed in new media, technology and the virtual world. I realize that in order to truly engage the teen girls that I train, mentor and teach, I too, must make a conscious effort to learn this medium with their relational habits and interests in mind. Although, I am critical of mainstream media due to its negative portrayals and limited representations of women and minorities, I also know that it can be constructive. I can be proactive and critically engage as a consumer, scholar and practitioner.

Media can be an educational tool in classrooms, community centers, homes, and churches to start a dialogue with teens on just about any social issue. Bashing and resisting new media is ineffective if my goal as a practitioner is empowerment, engagement and transformation through the active participation of adolescent girls. Rejecting the power of media and its generational influence has the potential to jeopardize teachable moments and professional development opportunities. Last, there has been a demand among girls and youth serving agencies to integrate media literacy in their after-school programs for older teens. Many programs have standard activities for middle and high school aged students but face some challenges to engage teens beyond the structured after school programming. For example, a student may have been part of an after school program since middle school but start to lose interest in 10<sup>th</sup> grade because she no longer find the program relevant. Program staff are often seeking professional assistance to infuse media literacy in their training and later youth programs.

### **Social Influences and Teens**

As teens begin to learn about self, their bodies, social attitudes and behaviors, they are bombarded by constructed messages by mainstream media. There are many implications associated with media consumption and overexposure, which demand a deeper analysis and understanding of its negative effects and direct impact on teens in all social settings. What they're learning from the media should be given as much weight as what they're learning from school textbooks.

In addition to the high level of media interaction, teens also learn stereotypical messages about gender and gender roles from mainstream media. After home and school, the media is the most conditioning agent in adolescents' lives, as is illustrated in the graphic below on the cycle

of social influences, where the home is presented as the first environment that conditions children and institutionalize the socialization process. In *Beyond Appearance: A New Look at Adolescent Girls*, Norine Johnson reveals

There are many psychologists who look at the effect of the culture on adolescent girls' body image. Psychological researchers have concluded that media portrayals help teens define what it means to be a girl and later a woman (p.10).

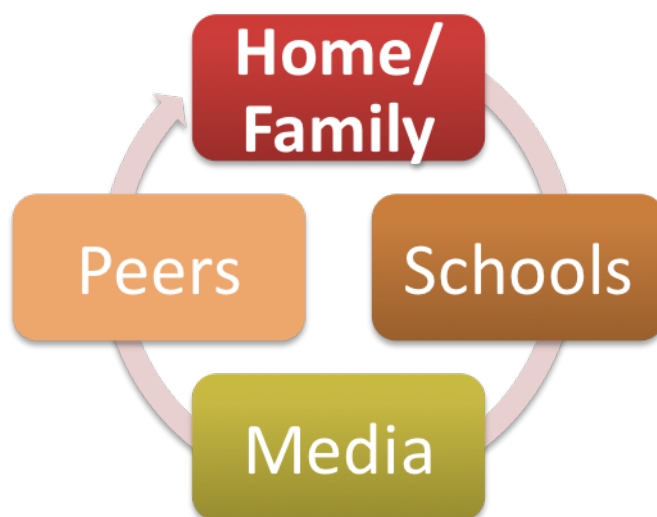
The socialization process begins in childhood and continues through adulthood while being more pervasive during the adolescent years.

Since the media is not the only social factor that influences how teens' view themselves, their identity and self-image, the other social factors must be closely examined to assess the depth of their impact. In *How Schools Shortchange Girls-The AAUW Report*, it states, "From pink to blue tags in hospital nurseries, to Barbie dolls and G.I. Joes, and on to cheerleaders and football players, our society hold different expectations for girls and boys. These expectations in turn generate different patterns of behavior toward children, depending on their sex (p.16)." Carla Fine injects, "Gender stereotypes are not just about toys and games. From the moment of birth, society treats boys and girls, as if they were separate species...Gender based discrimination not only shapes opportunities and experiences for boys and girls but also affects the way they see themselves, each other, and their world (p.10)." As demonstrated by decades of research by AAUW, Fine and other researchers, how students are treated based on gender and other social construct, has a ripple effect on teen girls that goes beyond self-perception. In reality, these first experiences will influence students' decision-making, level of participation in classes, career paths, achievements, relationships and whether they succeed or fail as citizens in the real world.

## Identity Development and Girls



There are several external forces influencing adolescent development, girlhood and perceptions of what's expected from both sexes at a very young age. In your face: the culture of beauty and you by Shari Graydon, she claims that the constant restrictive portrayals of girls reinforce these early lessons about gender and the focus on girls' bodies. She states, "Being portrayed so often as objects to be looked at-as opposed to people who are doing things-makes women and girls much more aware of themselves as being watched (p.71)." The prevalence of media's scrutiny, peer pressure and being under surveillance about one's physical appearance make girls more self-conscious and in turn drive teen girls to devalue other important aspect of their lives such as succeeding in school and pursuing non-traditional careers. Furthermore, an obsession with conforming to media portrayal of beauty has the potential to cultivate destructive behaviors and decisions in adolescent girls.



Home, schools and peers are other the primary sources of gender conditioning and identity formation of all children. Michael Nakkula summarizes the meaning of identity succinctly while explaining it through new lens. He states, “It is, rather, the lived experience of an ongoing process-the process of integrating successes, failures, routines, habits, rituals, novelties, thrills, threats, violations, gratifications, and frustrations into a coherent and evolving interpretation of who we are. Identity is the embodiment of self-understanding. We are who we understand ourselves to be, as that understanding is shaped and lived out our everyday experience (p.11).” School is a big part of that experience and should anticipate the changes that adolescents are facing academically and socially in their mediated world. Many educators, researchers and practitioners are starting to connect these issues to education reform and curriculum development. The daily school experiences of adolescents must connect their instructions, academic achievements to their social interactions outside the classroom and school ground. Nakkula continues “Given the amount of time young people spend in school, the educational context plays a critical role in identity formation...Because the answer to the identity question “Who am I?” is inordinately shaped by the contexts, relationships, and activities in which youth are most deeply invested, it is essential that our schools be environments in which young people choose to invest and through which their investment is adequately reciprocated (p.13).

As deeply connected as identity formation and adolescent development are to education, the transformation of school culture and meaningful relationships will occur through conscious teacher practice and be prioritized by school leadership. This education reform will have to become as critical as budget allocation, standardized testing, classroom management, student retention, and graduation rates, closing the achievement gap and ending the “gender war.” In

other words, every aspect of the students' learning process is correlated to who they are now, who they're told they can be and who they will become as they navigate through these complex changes.

Educators and other practitioners now know that one size does not fit all, whether discussing learning styles, abilities, gender or culture in relation to students' performance. The same level of awareness and sensitivity are needed to address issues affecting adolescent girls. In *Beyond Appearance: A New Look at Adolescent Girls*, Norine Johnson, Michael C. Roberts, Judith Worell state that "Adolescents gain much of their values and ideas from various reference groups, such as families, peers, teachers, ethnic culture, spiritual structures, and so on... Thus the context of family is important for understanding adolescent girls (p.11)." They assert, "The adolescent girl's race and ethnicity affect her personal identity as well as influence others' views of her and behavior towards her. Race, ethnicity, gender, class, and sexual identity all shape and define opportunities in America and need to be acknowledged for both the strengths and the stresses they bring into girls' lives (p.6)." As shown in several studies on adolescent development and girlhood, there are more than one social variable that form adolescents' identity and self-perception.

Johnson suggests that all social contexts such as race and ethnicity must be considered when exploring girls' development without overshadowing one contributing factor over another. Therefore, gender cannot be analyzed without recognizing the equal weight of race and class in girls' experiences. In *Young Femininity: Girlhood, Power and Social Changer*, Sinikka Aapola, Marnina Gonick and Anita Harris affirm that "The various meanings and experiences of girlhood are not created in isolation, they inform each other... The same is true for girls of all races, classes and ethnicities (p.1)" All the social elements in girls' development matter and work in



concert to shape her sense of self in the world and to imagine her future role.

Girls in the Middle: Working to Succeed in School by Research for Action, Inc., commissioned by the American Association of University Women Educational Foundation, reports that “adolescent girls typically undertake the process of identity making with conscious effort, pain, uncertainty and creativity (p.36).” Although identity making is described as “conscious”, it is critical to investigate the sources that are conditioning girls as they transition through adolescence. Research for Action, Inc. infers that “since school takes up a disproportionately large part of their lives, it is not surprising that a great deal of this identity work goes on in schools (p.36).” This groundbreaking report emphasizes the effect of various environments, particularly schools; play in molding girls’ identity as they approach adolescence. Furthermore, girls are seen and described by the researchers as “active agents” with the power to modify how they navigate in schools. In many cases, this is not a passive stage but one that is turbulent and fluid.

### **Girls’ Experiences In Schools**

School environments and their influences are at the core of many AAUW reports. Similar to the mainstream media, girls begin to absorb and observe negative gender laced messages early in their school life about what it means to be a girl and how they are expected to perform academically and socially. Research for Action, Inc. discovered that “adolescent girls struggle with an often contradictory set of expectations. They are to be sexy and flirtatious but at the same time remain “good girls.” They are to fend off aggressive male attention while simultaneously meeting teachers’ expectations of nonaggressive behavior (p.2).” In essence, adolescent girls from the outset of their school experience begin to learn subtle and overt

messages about how they should engage in their world based on how they're perceived by adults and their peers. This complex interaction fueled the inevitable downward spiral of girls' self-esteem and experiences in schools and community settings.

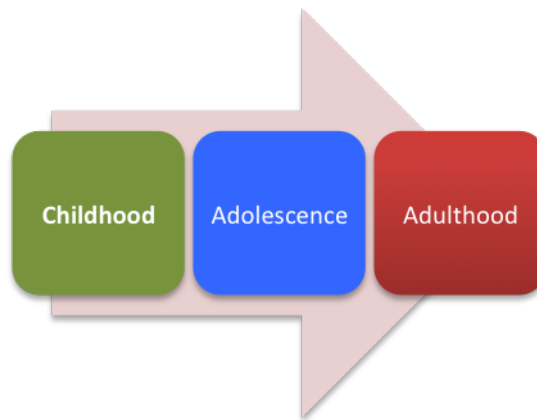
In *Gender Gap in Schools: Girls Losing Out*, Trudy Hanmer discusses the challenges girls face academically, socially, physically while dealing with gender inequality and social pressures. Hanmer affirms that "At puberty, while young women are experiencing body changes within themselves and among friends, the media-especially magazines, television, and movies-present the ideal young woman as thinner than average (p.23)." In effect, girls rarely measure up to the models and celebrities that they see on television and on magazine covers. She continues, "Body image becomes increasingly important during adolescence. When girls' minds are taken seriously, they are less likely to be adversely affected by media images of women's beauty (p.25)." To combat the cultural and physical pressure that girls continue to face as they go through adolescence, the manner in which those in their lives treat them will have lasting impact on how girls view their intellect and their place in the society. In other words, parents, teachers, counselors, after-school providers and others can play a role in helping girls becoming resilient.

In *Young Femininity: Girlhood, Power and Social Change*, Sinikka Aapola, Marnina Gonick and Anita Harris take a different slant in their examination of adolescence. They view, "...girlhood as something that is constructed socially, rather than merely as a stage of life fixed by biological processes and programmed psychological development...Girlhood is something that is both individually and collectively accomplished through the participating in the social, material and discursive practices defining young femininity. Thus, what it means to be a girl is constantly changing (p.1)." As girls' identity constantly shift as they transition through the life cycle, their school and home life remain static and does not reflect the traits highlighted in

mainstream media. For example, parents and teachers may strive to raise girls to value their intelligence whereas the media may promote counter messages that devalue such a trait.

Furthermore, there is a disconnection between what's important to adolescent girls and the expectations of adults in girls' lives. In addition, there is a lack of understanding on ways to have meaningful dialogues with girls about what matter to them and what they're being exposed to from the mainstream media. Parents and teachers are unaware of how teens are dissecting the lessons and messages consumed from the media. Last, there is a lack of community and educational spaces for girls to have uncensored dialogue about social issues that matter to them while developing tools to make critical decisions pertaining to their life goals.

### **Socialization and Adolescent Girls**



The socialization process begins in childhood and continues through adulthood while being more pervasive during the adolescent years. Although adolescent girls have been the focus of many studies from the fields of women's/gender studies, psychology, sociology and other academic disciplines, there is one sub-population that is often understudied: African-American girls. In teaching Black Girls, Venus Evans-Winters confirms this trend. She claims, "In social science and educational research, African-American female adolescent experience, in particular,

have been left out, white out (subsumed under White girls' experiences) black out (generalized within Black male experience), or simply pathologized (p.9).” All girls face challenges related to gender but girls of color, especially those of African descent, must also deal with the impact of race and yet issues related to adolescent girls are analyzed through a single lens. Evans-Winters contends “As raced, classed, and gendered subjects, African American female students are multiply affected by racist, sexist, and classist research paradigms and resulting policies (p.8).” Clearly, it is insufficient to simply explore girls' identity and socialization without the intersection of race, class and culture. Evans-winters concludes that “...researchers tend to assume that White female and Black females have similar socialization processes (p.9).” Based on these new findings, it is imperative to address similarities and differences among adolescent girls while validating their unique experiences.

Last, there is a tendency to lump all girls as one monolithic group with universal experiences and similar issues. Granted girls do share some common experiences, their uniqueness must not be overlooked to generalize the social problems they face. The 1996 AAUW Report concluded “what works for girls involves a repertoire of possibilities (p.88).” The glaring differences must be recognized and understood by teachers, parents, after-school providers in order to teach, raise and mentor adolescent girls effectively.

In addition to foundation-sponsored research, women's studies scholars have also been analyzing media images of women and girls through feminist lenses. Many have made a direct correlation to the roles of women and negative body image to how women are represented in magazines. The Hunter College Women's Studies Collective Scholars assert that, “our perception of women and men are shaped by our symbolic constructs of “femininity” and “masculinity (p.25).” The way women and girls are portrayed in the mass media is a reflection of

their social status in society. These “symbolic constructs“ greatly influence how women are treated and viewed by men and their female counterparts. Furthermore, the Collective Scholars maintain “cultural imagery, largely originating in men’s minds, expresses ideas about women and our roles (p.28).” These images of women produced by men and “some by women as we create ourselves to fit the classificatory system that already exists” have a detrimental effect on women’s perception of self (p.28). Women internalize these images and men normalize them, so they become acceptable representations in the culture.

In *The Media and Body Image*, Maggie Wykes and Barrie Gunther infer that “...such a connection must make sense to the readers on the basis of other experience; it has to have cultural consonance in that it fits prior knowledge that may have historical (origins (as in the long history of re presentation of femininity) or occur elsewhere in the contemporary shared culture (newspapers, television, the web) or social practices (family units, religion, employment). Magazines are part of broader discursive practices and power relations; they fit ideas within those and those ideas come from that context (p.82). According to a 2004 study by the Kaiser Family Foundation, “adolescents consistently cite teen magazines as their favorite non-book reading material. Another 1997 Kaiser Report provided analysis of articles in leading teen magazines-*Seventeen*, *YM*, *Sassy*, and *Teen* –found themes relating to appearance (37%), dating (35%) and clothes and fashion (32%) were most prevalent. Teen magazines appear to play a critical role in teen reading activities and the type of social subject matters they’re exposed to. In the case of teen magazines, femininity and beauty are at the core of what they promote and advertise.

Many feminist scholars have highlighted the role of advertising and its effects on women’s body image, self-perception and mental health (Dines and Humez, 1995; Kilbourne,

1999). Other experts in similar academic disciplines have focused on women's magazines and the obsession with ideal beauty and thinness (Wolf, 1992, Kilbourne, 1999). Research on women and media has failed to incorporate representations of girls and young women. Since research on representation of women in mass-media and popular culture have failed to integrate teen girls' voices in their analysis, the synthesis bridges the gaps by centralizing girls' voices by including their perspectives in the research project.

Due to the women's movement and cultural shifts in our society, women have made great strides in their personal and professional lives. As a result, girls have more positive role models from many male dominated fields such business, technology, government and sports. In spite of all these advances, it is imperative to point out that sexism still exists in virtually every aspect of women and girls' lives. Studies have also shown there are more women pursuing higher education than ever before. These advances cannot blur the realities and needs of many girls who are remained invisible from public and educational discourse. In *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*, Mary Pipher reveals, "...girls today are much oppressed. They are coming of age in a more dangerous, sexualized and media saturated culture. They face incredible pressures to be beautiful and sophisticated, which in junior high means using chemicals and being sexual. As they navigate a more dangerous world, girls are less protected (p.12)."

Furthermore, schools and teachers must also see the impact of media consumption and saturation as a critical part of education and integrate these issues in their teaching. The 1996 AAUW report recommended that we "Provide opportunities for girls to share concerns about their changing bodies, career goals, and relationship with boys, girls, and parents (88)." Clearly, teachers and other providers must be part of this effort to engage girls to understand and work

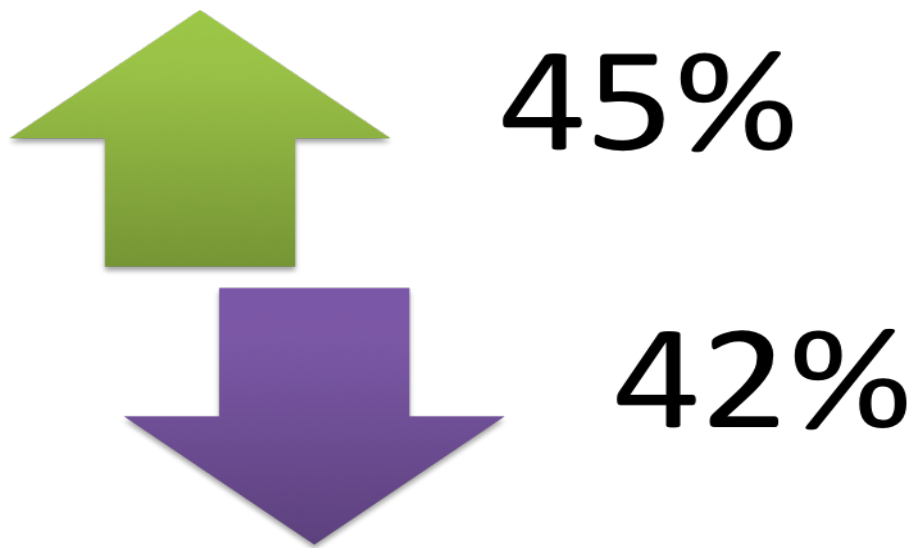
with girls to create educational spaces that strengthen their academic without suppressing their voices.

Carol Gilligan (1989), a leading psychologist in adolescent girls' development has reported a dramatic decrease of self-esteem as girls approach adolescence. Jean Kilbourne (1999) contributes this developmental shift "partly because they cannot possibly escape the message that their bodies are objects, and imperfect as that (p.27)." Girls are not a homogenous group; therefore, they are not affected in the same manner or to the same degree. Granted that all teens are surrounded by unhealthy images, but adolescent girls are particularly exposed to limited positive representations of girlhood. In other words, the mass media has packaged girlhood to only highlight certain aspects of girls' lives.

## CHAPTER 3

### TEEN GIRLS' VIEWS ABOUT MAINSTREAM MEDIA: A PILOT RESEARCH AND VIDEO PROCESS

Teen magazines are of particular interest because they have survived in spite of changes in the publishing industry and the emergence of new technology. For example, many print magazines also have a digital presence online where readers can get more information and continue to engage with its content. Pierce (1993) affirms, "...Magazines, as part of the broader category 'media,' are a powerful socialization force." At the core of the synthesis project is to also examine how messages about gender roles and identity are transmitted through media. Past studies of teen magazine readers indicate that they turn to these magazines as a valued source of advice about their personal lives. Another survey conducted by Taylor Research and Consulting Group indicated that 12 to 15 year-old girls look to magazines (42%) almost as much as their friends (45%) for the coolest trends.



Source: Taylor Research and Consulting Group



This chapter describes a video series, the purpose of which is to showcase the perspectives of girls who are part of the G.I.R.L.S. Project and GIRL TV. The video can be used as a tool to stimulate dialogue about the types of media that girls are immersed in and interacting with. I'm interested in listening to girls' opinions on messages promoted in mainstream media, primarily television, teen magazines, advertising, music, movies, and music videos. The video documentary highlights girls' narratives about their experiences as viewers, consumers and media makers. It addresses these overarching questions 1) What are the dominant images that teen girls are exposed to in mainstream media? 2) What are girls' perspectives on popular images in mainstream media? As part of the synthesis project, I will launch a new video series to be broadcasted on GIRL TV. Below is a list of the interview questions. (In an effort to be unbiased and have a visual of print materials, I asked interviewees to bring copies of magazines that they read and/or like.)

1. What's your favorite subject in school?
2. Share with me some TV shows that you watch on a weekly basis?
3. Which social media are you a member part of?
4. Who's your favorite musical artist? What do you like about this individual and/or their music?
5. Tell me about the type of magazines you read
6. What do you like about the TV shows that you watch?
7. Do you learn about mainstream media in school?
8. What do you want to be when you grow up?
9. Is there social issue that you're concerned about?
10. Do you compare yourself to the models or celebrities that you see in the media?

In an effort to ground my synthesis exploration of adolescent development, identity formation and the impact of media on teen girls' perceptions, the following theoretical frameworks will be explored: feminist theory and critical thinking. I've used a multi-disciplinary approach to critically assess the media influences on teens' lives and the complex issues that they deal with in various settings. With these challenges in mind, utilizing the frameworks of Carol Gilligan (1995)'s relational approach to research, I also adapted a "voice-centered method of psychological inquiry..." (p.14). Gilligan advocates "Listening to the girls speaking, we also listen to for the unspoken-places where there is no voice or where girls may have silenced their experience or have simply not been heard...This voice-centered method guides a careful record of different voices within girls' narratives in girls' own words" (p.14) This is a fitting exploratory and creative approach that have allowed me to centralize girls' voices in the video series. One short video is shared and analyzed as part of the synthesis project in chapter 3.

Active listening is an important aspect of critical thinking. This skill became even more important of the synthesis project during the interview process with the girls. Listening to girls is not as simple as it sounds but clear instructions are provided in the *Listening Guide* (Brown et al., 1988; Brown and Gilligan, 1992) for interpretation and analysis. In addition, Gilligan also highlights how the race and gender of the researcher may impact the girls' narratives. She shares the following experience during a research study: "In the Understanding Adolescence Study, our focus on race, ethnicity, and class underscored the central importance of "who is listening" (p.15). She made a significant discovery during the study that contributed to the way in which participants may or may not engage depending on who the researcher is. As a result, their approach in the interviewing process and data analysis was modified to address differences in girls' narratives. Although the synthesis project is not a traditional research, Gilligan's approach

is relevant, as I needed to be conscious on how I design and ask the set of questions to provide important information related to the focus of the synthesis.

### **Overview of the Video Production and Interview Process**

In an effort to supplement the topics address in the synthesis, my project includes a collection of interviews conducted with a few girls who are current members of the G.I.R.L.S. Project. Due to the time limitation of the project, I interviewed only three girls, whose ages are 15-18. Two interviews were held at our television studio and one was done at a local coffee shop convenient to the young woman. Scheduling the interviews became a major challenge since all the participants are involved in extra-curricular activities and occupied with other responsibilities. As a result, the interviews were held later and were rescheduled several times due to cancellations. Each interview lasted about 30-45 minutes on and off camera. I was the only person present while interviewing the girls.

In addition to age, the girls were diverse in race and school setting. For example, one young woman is home-schooled. Another attends private school and the last is in public school. All the teens reside in the greater Boston area in neighborhoods on the outskirts of major cities such as Boston. In regard to the race and ethnicity of the girls, two are girls of color (1 Hispanic and 1 African-American) and the third teen is Caucasian. Since all the girls are part of the organization, they were not selected to represent a particular demographic. In addition, the final participants primarily reflect the current membership of the organization. Although, they have similar interests in television shows, music and extra curricular activities, they also revealed versatile but creative career aspirations.

Before recording the interviews, I asked the girls if they had any questions. I shared the main focus of the interview; which is to share their perception of mainstream media and how they're engage with it. Prior to the date of the interview, I've asked the girls to bring copies of magazine issues they read. This was done to see first hand the type of magazines that the girls like and read. Only one girl brought magazines for the interview. The other two have forgotten to bring any copies. As I reviewed the synthesis proposal and preparation notes, I realized that I've assumed that the all the teens are primarily teen magazine readers. To challenge my perceptions and ensure that the girls can freely disclose their magazine preference, I generalized the question about magazines to prevent injecting my assumptions in their responses.

Videotaping and asking questions simultaneously proved to be more physically challenging than I expected. I also had to deal with the locations of all the interviews, including the studio. In addition to having prepared questions, I had to be aware of the setting and assist the girls to become comfortable before I turning on the camera. All the girls were nervous but over did an amazing job sharing their views about they read, watch, their favorite musical artists and whether they learn about media in school. The final short video provides a snapshot what the girls discussed and further reveals their media consumption and how they're making sense of what they're being exposed to.

### **Analysis of Interviews**

In all three interviews I asked the girls to share which magazines they read. Based on the answers provided, all the three girls read *Seventeen* but also like Glamour, Elle and Teen Vogue (see sample of magazine covers below). The primary reason for choosing these magazines was to discover the latest fashion trends and to read about their favorite artists. For example, two out

of the three girls claim Taylor Swift as their favorite artists. Taylor is like because “she’s real” and “down to earth.” One teen likes Drake and Alicia because they’re both “real.” She admires Alicia because she plays several instruments, her singing and acting abilities. In addition, the teen also plays the piano and felt connected to Alicia because she inspired her to be creative and try new artistic activities outside of school.



All the teens repeatedly used the word “real” to describe their favorite celebrities and the lyrics of their musicians that they like. One male artist is particularly controversial as his lyrics are often explicit and he raps about issues that are geared at an adult audience. The teen was clearly aware of this issue but felt that because of his background she understood his source for songwriting. In spite of his sexually explicit lyrics, she admires him for speaking his mind and not backing down from critique. In regard to Taylor Swift, she is liked because she seems different from other celebrities her age who are often in trouble for drinking and being reckless. Taylor is perceived as a good girl who sings about falling in love and writes lyrics that come from her diary. Based on these answers, it appears the girls are aware of what they’re expected to like to make the choice to listen to certain artists if they find them authentic and use their craft to share their personal stories, possibly struggles. Both Drake and Taylor Swift are highly regarded by the teens because they present their true self through their music.

In addition to their preference for specific magazines and musical artists, the interview also covered what the girls wanted to be when they grow up or after graduating from high school. All the girls plan to go to college and pursue studies in the arts. One teen would like to work as a magazine editor at a major fashion publication. Another young woman would like to be a photographer, as she loves taking pictures. The last teen would like to be a journalist and cover important issues of the day. The girls were clear about their career goals and where they see themselves after high school. Often people assume that all the girls who are part of the G.I.R.L.S. Project are aspiring reporters, when in fact; they have a wide range of career interests. Although the program welcomes all girls and teaches participants leadership development and media production, the program does not attempt to steer participants into one career track related to journalism. The skills the students learned are versatile enough to benefit all participants

regardless of their career aspirations. For example, the ability to think critically and problem-solve are important skills that are applicable now and for many years after graduating high school. Overall, the responses to the questions posed were surprising as I was hearing about their interests for the first time. For two of the oldest teens who've been part of the organization longer, their views have evolved and have become more confident in expressing their likes and dislikes.

### **Conclusion: Reflection in Retrospect**

The synthesis project is culmination of what I gained throughout the Critical and Creative program (CCT) and a venue to dig deeper into an area of interest that I neglected to reflect about. It provided an opportunity to have a meaningful dialogue with the girls in the program and actively listen to their views about various issues. Although I interviewed three teen girls, I found their narratives enticed me to broaden the focus of the study by including social media as it had become common in our daily lives. If time permitted and I had more support such as a video crew, I would have loved to have longer conversations with all the girls together. In addition, I believe a group discussion where girls ask each other questions and interview their peers could have added another layer to the synthesis. Ultimately, I intend to sustain a dialogue with the girls about the type of media they're engaging with and to collectively produce original media that defy stereotypical representations. The short video created, as part of the synthesis will be offered as a pilot to launch a series on GIRL TV and to showcase the work of the GIRLS Project to the broader community.

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