"I Want to BE Loved"
Tween Girls Make Media about Relationships

A School-Based Participatory Research Project
Toronto, Ontario

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the media collages produced by female participants during a participatory research project conducted at an elementary school in Toronto, Ontario. The research project employed a variety of arts-based techniques, of which collage-making was one, to elicit girls' perspectives on the theme of relationships. Participants were in grade seven and eight between the ages of eleven and fourteen at the time of the study. To contextualize the girls' use of media in their collages, a brief introduction to current representations of girlhood in mainstream culture is provided. The girls' collages are then analyzed using strategies of content analysis and narrative analysis. Emphasis is placed on understanding how the girls engage with media messages about gender and sexuality through their collages. Drawing on the results of this research, recommendations for integrating media literacy into health education programmes are presented.

KEYWORDS

girlhood, sexuality, gender, popular culture, media literacy, health education

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Introduction

This paper reports on the findings of an arts-based participatory research project conducted with students between the ages of eleven and fourteen at an elementary school in Toronto, Ontario. In Ontario, school policies and procedures categorize these grade levels as "intermediate," thus conceptualizing these years as a transitional period between the stages of child and teenager. As a result, this paper borrows the term "tween," a phrase used by youth studies scholars to describe young people in these transitional years, to refer to the participants in this study. The objective of this project was to elicit young people's

perspectives on the theme of "relationships" by positioning them as cultural producers. This research project was designed to enhance learning in relation to specific areas of Ontario's Health and Physical Education curriculum for grades seven and eight. In particular, it focused on teaching students "living skills," an area of the curriculum that deals with enhancing students' psychosocial development (OME, 2010).

The objective of the research project was to explore ways media literacy could be combined with health literacy to help students achieve certain curricular objectives, such as learning how to interact positively with others and apply creative thinking to solve interpersonal problems. Over the three-week workshop series, the students produced written narratives and media collages that explore a range of themes including the realities of peer conflict, the value of friendship, the impacts of bullying, the pressure to "fit in," the dynamics of family life, the meaning of romantic love, and the challenges of growing up. During the final workshop sessions, the students worked together to compile their writings and collages into small self-published books called zines.

As the project progressed, it became clear that there were significant differences in the thematic content explored by male and female participants through their creative work. These differences were most apparent in the media collages produced by participants. For example, only one boys' collage addresses the ways in which the media puts pressure on him to look and act certain ways, whereas this theme is addressed directly by several female participants ($n=8$). Further, this male student's exploration of the pressure to "fit in" and "be cool" is not connected to any direct critique of media representations of gendered notions of masculinity. Typically the girls' collages about the theme of "fitting in" investigate media representations of femininity directly by including references to advertisements promoting normative assumptions about female beauty. To explore the girls' understandings of media messages further, this paper focuses exclusively on the media collages produced by female participants.

Since tween girls are bombarded with gender-specific messages about what to expect as they transition from childhood to adulthood, this paper was inspired by a commitment to better understand how the girls understand media messages. Media marketed toward this cohort of girls is often sexualized, presenting codes of behaviour and ways of dressing that are associated with adult female heterosexual identities. However, at the same time, tween girls remain the target group of many toy marketers who sell products, like Bratz fashion dolls, that promote more childlike, and highly gendered, kinds of play. As a result, young girls are pulled in two directions – toward childhood and adulthood – often simultaneously. Growing up as a girl, in this sense, can be a complicated process involving the negotiation of a variety of often-conflicting messages about girlhood and femininity. The analysis that follows foregrounds the complex ways the mainstream media is implicated in the psychosocial development of girls while acknowledging girls as active consumers capable of engaging with media messages in critical and productive ways.

To contextualize the girls' use of media in their collages, this paper begins with a brief introduction to current representations of girlhood in mainstream culture. The girls' collages are then analyzed using strategies of content analysis and narrative analysis. Emphasis is placed on understanding how the girls engage with media messages about gender and sexuality through their collages. Drawing on the results of this research, recommendations for integrating media literacy into health education programmes are presented.

Mediated Girlhoods

> I go through guys like money
> flyin' out the hands
> They try to change me
> but they realize they can't
> And every tomorrow is a day I never plan

If you're gonna be my man understand
I can't be tamed

Miley Cyrus,
"Can't Be Tamed" (2010)

Since the 1980s, images of 'empowered' young women have proliferated in mainstream media. Indeed, sexiness and assertiveness have been combined to generate a new female advertising icon – one that is now being used to market products towards young girls. Borrowing from a more radical feminist movement, media representations of young women in the 1990s translated the notion of "girl power" into a full-blown visual iconography. By the end of this decade, with the help of the Spice Girls, girl power became "a catchphrase for young women's new style of neoliberal feminist display: a self-stylized, sexy, brash and individualized expression of power" (Harris, 2003, 75).

In the second decade of the new millennium, "girl power" remains a powerful marketing strategy directed at young girls – "tweens" – who have increased purchasing power. However, representations of girl power in the mainstream media are conflicted at best. An analysis of *Entertainment Weekly*'s online guide to "28 Essential Girl Power Flicks"[1] reveals some of these troubling contradictions (Raphael & Susman, 2009). Among other problematic examples, the guide lists *Enchanted* (2007) and *The Princess Bride* (1987) as "girl power" films, both of which reproduce many of the conventions of fairy tales, including representing female characters as in need of rescuing by their male counterparts and using heterosexual romance as the primary force driving plot development. More recently, the *Twilight* films (2008/9/10), a tween girl cultural phenomenon, have been described as representing "girl power" by critics and fans alike. In the context of these films, however, "girl power" seems to refer more to the role young girls play as a consumerist

[1] This guide was published online in 2009 by *Entertainment Weekly* in support of Women's Self Empowerment Week.

group at the box-office rather than the expression of progressive ideas about gender and sexuality (Cargill, 2009). In fact, the *Twilight* films depict characters in very conventional gender roles.[2]

Alternatively, media representations of girlhood can also signify what Pat MacPherson and Michelle Fine have termed "equal opportunity sexuality," an orientation that positions girls as equally entitled to sex as boys (1995, 192). The song lyrics that opened this section are just one example of how "equal opportunity sexuality" is represented in the media. Miley Cyrus is a tween pop icon, first appearing on the Disney Channel show *Hannah Montana* in 2006 and then embarking on a solo music career in 2008. The girls who participated in this study, many of whom would have watched *Hannah Montana* on television when they were younger, have seen Cyrus grow up before their eyes to claim a new adult, sexualized identity. The song "Can't Be Tamed," from her latest album of the same name, is about an independent woman who has embraced her sexuality and will not let anyone "hold [her] back" (2010). Cyrus is making her intentions clear: she wants a sexual relationship with no strings attached. As a result, these lyrics could be interpreted as offering young girls an empowering example of how to negotiate relationships in which they can express themselves (and their sexuality) as they choose. Indeed, when read against the conventional plotlines of the *Twilight* films, for example, the expression of "girl power" articulated by Cyrus seems altogether radical.

However, Cyrus' brand of "girl power" can be problematic as well. For example, MacPherson and Fine warn that this orientation toward "equal opportunity sexuality" can obscure the nuanced ways in which sex is different for girls, thus disavowing the experiences of girls for whom sex was complicated by, for example, unwanted pregnancy or sexual

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[2] Once again, the heterosexual romance between the two lead characters, Bella and Edward, takes center stage, eventually culminating in their marriage, shortly after Bella graduates high school. She then becomes pregnant.

violence. They conclude that "[s]ameness with guys – assuming the same sexual desire and right to satisfy it – involves differentiating self from 'other girls,' especially victims, who get hurt in love" (1995, 192).

In addition, this kind of "girl power" often associates female empowerment with physical attractiveness. Cyrus, in "Can't Be Tamed", indicates that she receives attention from "every guy, everywhere" and "always gets a ten" because she is "built like that" (2010). This association between appearance and empowerment is complicated for girls, acknowledging the power young girls may derive from their physical appearance while simultaneously objectifying girls' bodies and linking attractiveness and assertiveness in problematic ways.

In this regard, much research has explored the impact of media representations of attractiveness on girls' self esteem (Grabe, Ward & Hyde, 2008; Dittmar, 2009). Feminist scholars, for example, have documented the complex ways in which "the cosmetic panopticon pressures all women to participate in creating 'the ideal feminine body-subject'" (Giovanelli & Ostertag, 2009, 290). For example, Margaret Carlisle Duncan argues that beauty ideals are duplicitous primarily because they promote beauty rituals and exercise regimes as 'good for women,' thus obscuring the ways in which beauty ideals can be disempowering. Though beauty can indeed be a source of empowerment for women, what she finds troubling is how women learn to think of body ideals "as springing from their innermost selves" (1994, 50). Often, these ideals are internalized and naturalized to such an extent that we can no longer see how they were culturally contingent and socially mandated in the first place.

This brief review of current representations of girlhood in mainstream culture reveals that tween girls receive very mixed messages about gender and sexuality. This is not surprising as adolescent girls are presented with very different role models in the media,

some who conform to more traditional gender norms and others who embrace their sexuality in sometimes-radical ways. In addition, young girls are also exposed to ideas about gender and sexuality at home and at school. School curricula and parental attitudes, for example, often position young girls as innocent or vulnerable and therefore in need of protection from that which is viewed as belonging exclusively to the realm of the grown-up: (hetero)sexuality. Such conceptualizations of girlhood also tend to characterize young girls who are sexually active as deviant and in need of discipline. Individuals and institutions that hold these views often conceive of the media as a potential threat, forcing girls to grow up faster than developmentally "natural." What is generally missing, however, from debates over girlhood culture is critical consideration of how young girls might engage with media in unpredictable and productive ways. As such, contemporary concerns about young girls' inability to resist the seductive powers of the market are often exaggerated. Such concerns tend to discount young girls' reasoning capacities by positioning them exclusively as passive consumers of media messages rather than active interpreters and producers (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2005/9).

Method

This research project adopted "a youth as cultural producers framework" for discussing the theme of relationships in schools (Tao & Mitchell, 2010, 161). Among other arts-based methods,[3] this project used collage to elicit girls' perspectives on interpersonal issues. Each student was required to make one media collage during the workshop series. As a qualitative research method, collage offers interesting ways to elicit participants' voices, to represent

[3] Linda Tuhiwai Smith demonstrates how "ideas about the nature of knowledge and the validity of specific forms of knowledge, became as much commodities of colonial exploitation as other natural resources" (1999, 59). As such, the choice of arts-based methods for this study was motivated by a political interest to challenge positivist research paradigms that dismiss alternative ways of knowing.

multiple and diverse perspectives, and to encourage reflexivity during the research process (Butler-Kisber, 2008; Switzer, 2009). Furthermore, the juxtaposition of collage elements can provoke conversation and expand understanding by revealing both intended and unintended meanings (Butler-Kisber, 2008).

In their review of the practical applications of visual methods in social research, Jon Prosser and Andrew Loxley contrast “researcher-created data” with “respondent-created data” (2008, 5). These two approaches represent different orientations to research using visual methods. Whereas the former orientation towards “researcher-created data” follows traditional research paradigms in which the researcher sets the agenda and interprets the data, the latter orientation towards “respondent-created data” adopts a more participatory approach. This research project was designed to elicit respondent-created data and thus was informed by the body of literature on using arts-based participatory research methodologies with youth (Driver, 2007; Switzer, 2009; Mitchell, 2006). Using visual methods to document the realities of their lives, the girls who participated in this study were invited to communicate how they see social problems and envision possible solutions (Walsh et al, 2002; Mitchell et al, 2005).

To this end, the collage activity gave students license to choose any relational theme as the subject of their work, with the only requirement being that they had to incorporate at least two items from the mainstream media into their design. When creating their collages, the students were encouraged to think about how their everyday interactions are influenced by media messages that promote certain behaviours, lifestyles, and values. The intention of this exercise was to draw the students’ attention to how the media can be a powerful mechanism of socialization while affording them the opportunity to communicate how they make sense of media messages in their daily lives. This latter objective acknowledges that young people do not just passively absorb media messages but rather actively construct their meaning by

interpreting and enacting them on a daily basis. Strategies of media analysis, such as identifying the ideological orientation of media messages and reflecting on the intentions of the producers of those messages, were discussed to prepare students for this activity.

Participants

The elementary school in which this research project was conducted is situated in the Palmerston-Little Italy neighbourhood, a predominantly middle class area of Toronto. The average annual income of residents who live in the school's catchment area varies from twenty per cent below to twenty per cent above the city average (Hulchanski, 2010). According to statistics published by the Toronto District School Board, ninety-two per cent of the students at the host school were born in Canada, compared to an average seventy-nine per cent for the school board. However, eight per cent of the students have been in Canada for one year or more but less than three, while the board average is slightly lower at five per cent. Fifty-eight female students participated in the study. Of those participants, twenty-two were in grade seven and thirty-six were in grade eight.

Since the students who participated in this study were in the Extended French and French Immersion streams, the majority of them came to the host school for grade seven from one of its French feeder schools. Their recent transition into middle school meant many of the students had to adjust to "a new cultural scene," perceiving and constructing their social roles in relation to those of their new peers (Finders, 1996, 71).[4] This transition from junior to middle school also serves as an important indicator of age and maturity,

[4] Many girls expressed anxieties about this transition, indicating that their relationships were now more complicated than before. One student, for example, wrote about the pressure to "fit in" affecting her self-esteem: "I thought that there was something wrong with me. Am I supposed to be like everyone else? Is this really what middle school does to you" (Female Student, Grade 8)? Another looked back at junior school as a time of greater stability when "everyone got along" and students from different social groups could work together "without awkwardness caused by social scale" (Female Student, Grade 8).

distinguishing these students from younger children and serving as a social marker of their entry into adolescence. However, by virtue of being on the threshold of adolescence, the independence they gained upon entering middle school is still limited in comparison to that afforded high schoolers.

Putting aside differences in parental understandings of what is an appropriate level of independence for this cohort of students, the rules and regulations of the school system carry certain assumptions about what these students are capable of in comparison to their older peers. Whereas, for example, students are penalized for submitting work late in high school, there are no late penalties in middle school. School grounds are also supervised more vigilantly by teachers at the middle school level, and students are not able to choose their own courses or make up their own schedules. As a result, though these students are afforded increased independence by virtue of being middle rather than junior school students, their independence is still limited by school rules and regulations that operate according to certain assumptions about the capabilities of eleven to fourteen year olds. This is the kind of 'inbetweenness' that defines the meaning of the age category "tween."

Though there has been increased interest by policymakers and researchers in recent years in eliciting young people's perspectives on issues that impact them directly, the voices of middle school girls between the ages of eleven and fourteen are heard less often than those of older cohorts. Many community-based projects that promote the involvement of youth often only extend invitations to young people fourteen years of age or older. Even projects that do not have a minimum age requirement often do not have the structures and systems in place to reach younger cohorts of youth. "Drop-ins," for example, as well as other community development initiatives geared toward fostering youth expression, are not as accessible to younger youth whose schedules are often determined and enforced by their

parents. As such, by engaging a younger cohort of youth – tweens – in participatory research, this project attempted to redress a silence that pervades youth studies scholarship.

Analysis

To analyze the students' collages, this paper combines strategies of *content analysis* and *narrative analysis*. The analysis presented in this report begins with "the interpretive assumption that youths *actively* construct meaningful cultural representations, rather than passively absorbing both consumer culture and school curricula" (Morrill et al, 2000, 528). In addition, the interpretations offered here are not intended to fix the meanings of the students' work but rather to foreground the social processes of their production and consumption. Reproductions of many of the students' collages analyzed in this report are included as appendices, creating the possibility for alternative readings and interpretations.

i. Content Analysis

The method of qualitative content analysis used in this report follows the process outlined by Satu Elo and Helvi Kynäs (2007). Each collage was examined using an open coding process wherein as many words were written down as necessary to describe its content. These lists of words were then grouped according to higher order categories. When organizing the collages into these categories, I was required to make decisions based on my interpretations of the collages as to which collages belong in the same category. These decisions were informed by the students' interpretations of their collages. In fact, the students did much of the content analysis for me by grouping their collages into categories for publication in the zines. I relied heavily on their organization of the data when making the categorizations described in this report.

ii. Narrative Analysis

For research that emphasizes understanding how research participants make sense of their own creative work, "the value of doing 'objective' forms of content analysis is minimal" (Yates, 2010, 289). From such an analysis, researchers learn *what* is represented in participants' stories and images but this will not necessarily tell researchers anything about *how* participants make sense of what is represented or *why* they chose to represent what they did. These observations are particularly relevant for arts-based research wherein fixing the meaning of creative productions – that is, identifying fixed referents for specific symbols – is not the point, but rather generating questions and initiating discussion (Eisner, 2008). As a result, the following analysis and discussion pursues all three areas of inquiry – the *what*, *why* and *how*. To answer these two latter questions, this paper employs strategies of narrative analysis.

In particular, this paper treats personal narratives as inherently connected to the social contexts in which they are produced (Riessman, 2002; Mishler, 1999). Such an analytic approach recognizes that personal stories are often influenced by "who we think we are and who others think we are" (Norquay, 2008, 190). In this regard, scholars have observed that we constantly negotiate our identities in relation to others, often selecting what sides of ourselves to exhibit in which social contexts. For example, Catherine Kohler Riessman indicates that "[i]nformants do not reveal an essential self as much as they perform a preferred one, selected from the multiplicity of selves or personas that individuals switch among as they go about their lives" (2002, 325). Applying these observations, the girls' collages were examined for what they reveal about how the girls actively define what it means to be a girl by interpreting mainstream media messages about femininity and articulating shared membership in their friendship groups.

Considering the role these social interactions play in perpetuating certain social norms is a central focus of this analysis. Mary Louise Adams contends that social norms "produce subjects who are 'normal,' who live 'normality,' and most importantly, *who find it hard to imagine anything different*" (2003, 13; italics added). If it is difficult to imagine anything different, it is definitely difficult to talk about anything different. That which falls beyond the limits of acceptability is often silenced, however not always intentionally, in the stories we tell about our lives. These silences are described by Kathryn Anderson and Dana Jack as the "muted channels" of women's experience. These scholars observe that "women often mute their own thoughts and feelings when they try to describe their lives in the familiar and publicly acceptable terms of prevailing concepts and conventions" (1991, 11). Women, in other words, often tell their life histories by connecting dots to fit dominant patterns. Listening "in stereo" to both dominant and subordinate channels is thus necessary to adequately address issues of gender and sexuality in women's stories. Though Anderson and Jack are referring specifically to adult women's narratives, I contend that the same concepts apply to analyzing younger women's experiences. As a result, the analysis that follows applies these concepts to interpreting the girls' collages.

iii. Student Voice

Any analysis of research that elicits student perspectives must also take into consideration the relationship between the students and the researchers, especially with regards to ethical issues of interpretation and authorship. For example, Lyn Yates indentifies two potentially contradictory research imperatives in research involving student voice: 1) research that gives voice to student participants as the endpoint of research, thus situating "these subjects as the authoritative interpreters of their own experiences"; and 2) research that engages reflectively and/or theoretically with the stories collected from student participants so that their

interpretations are not necessarily the only ones presented in research (2010, 281-8). Researchers who advocate this latter framework of analysis "understand commonsense understandings as themselves produced, as themselves artefacts, and believe the purpose of research is to produce a different picture of what is going on" (Yates, 2010, 282). The analysis presented in this paper blends these two research imperatives, providing space for the students to tell their own stories with my own critical reflection on their creative productions. Though mindful of how the voices of researchers can be privileged over those of students in analyses that follow this framework, I contend that unpacking the girls' collages for their explicit as well as implicit meanings is really a means of taking them seriously.

Results

An analysis of the content of the collages reveals that the girls explored three overarching themes in their work: *friendship* (*n=34*), *family* (*n=15*), and *love* (*n=9*). These themes are addressed individually in the following sections. Three collages are analyzed in detail – one associated with each theme – to underscore the complexity of their producers' experiences with relationships.

i. On Friendship

Friendship was the most common theme, with half the collages focusing on this subject. Homosocial relationships were the most common type of relationship depicted in collages about friendship (*n=16*). Collages were classified as depicting homosocial relationships if they exclusively represented same-sex friendship groups. Collages with even one reference to opposite-sex friends were classified as heterosocial. Of the remaining collages about

friendship, nine depicted heterosocial relationships. The rest (*n=9*) discussed friendship in general terms, often symbolically, without the use of photographs of people.

As windows on to the everyday life and collective practices of young girls, the collages about friendship offer rich insight into how young girls interact and communicate within their peer groups. Many girls used magazine images to create a lexicon of the activities and interests they share with their friends (Fig. 1). This kind of collage uses magazine images of beauty and fashion to claim a shared identity within friendship groups. These collages also seem to be legitimizing their producers' identities as teenage girls by incorporating signs and symbols of female adolescence found in mainstream media.

The girls' collages also reveal that heterosexual romance is frequently talked about among same-sex friends. In fact, references to romantic relationships appear most often in the girls' collages about friendship, suggesting that "boy talk" is a key part of social interactions between girls. The use of references to romance in these collages seems to suggest that "boy talk" is a means through which girls articulate their desires, claim membership in teen culture, and bond over shared interests. These references to romance are often subtle consisting of, for example, the words "hot guys" embedded among a variety of other images (Fig. 2) or the inscription "I ❤", in light pencil, pointing to teen icon Justin Bieber (Fig. 3). In addition, these references are often coded in images rather than words. For example, pictures of couples from popular culture, such as Justin Bieber and actress Selena Gomez, are included in several of the collages that have no written reference to romantic relationships.

In addition, some girls explore the function of media messages as normative social forces among their peer groups through their collages. Several students, for example, illustrate how media messages that market certain beauty products, fashion styles, and pop artists toward tween girls pressure them to 'fit in' rather than 'be themselves' (Fig. 4). Often this pressure is represented as coming from the students' friends, who are depicted as the

moderators of "what's hot and what's not," rather than the media itself (Fig. 5). Of the collages that draw heavily on imagery from teen and fashion magazines, the number that use media images to signal their producers' membership in teen culture far outnumber those that use media images to comment on the normative social force of media messages ($n=15$ and $n=8$ respectively).

One of the most interesting examples of a collage that critiques the normative social force of media messages was produced by a student of colour about "racial justice." This collage, entitled "The Way I See It" (Fig. 6), draws attention to the ways in which media representations of female bodies present racialized ideals of beauty. When compared to other collages that draw heavily on images from fashion magazines, this collage represents the greatest diversity of cultural and ethnic identities. Most collages of magazine imagery include photographs of white women and girls more commonly than photographs of women and girls of colour. This finding is not surprising given the tendency for fashion magazines, including those directed specifically at young girls, to use white models more often than models of colour.[5]

The producer of "The Way I See It" draws our attention to these representational issues in her collage. She also articulates a powerful message about multiculturalism in general by stating, "FRienDs cOMe In alL colors." As the title suggests, this collage presents this student's desire for the future, envisioning a society in which there is "racial justice." The viewer learns more about this student's understanding of "racial justice" from the other text included in her collage, such as phrases like "Naturally Beautiful" and "Embracing their heritages." These phrases suggest that this student does not just want people of all cultures to

[5] A review of the current content on the major teen magazines' websites supports this observation. For example, on the current hairstyle page of *Seventeen*'s website, only two girls of colour are depicted among a total of twelve models. Representation on *Teen Vogue*'s website is similarly biased, with three girls of colour among a total of twelve models on the main beauty page.

get along and be friends, though this is clearly one component of her message, but also wants women and girls of colour to celebrate their cultures and see themselves as beautiful. By using photographs from fashion magazines to create a composite representation of cultural diversity, this collage can be interpreted as making a powerful statement about the under-representation of girls and women of colour in the media. Collages such as this support the observation that young girls do not just passively absorb media messages, but rather are actively engaged in interpreting and negotiating their meaning (Duke, 2000).

ii. On Family

Sibling relationships were the most common relationship explored in collages about families (*n=7*). Other subjects included child-parent relationships (*n=4*), child-grandparent relationships (*n=1*), and family relationships in general (*n=2*). Unlike the collages on friendship, among which conflict between peers is a common theme, the collages that focused on sibling relationships almost exclusively represent the positive aspects of these relationships.[6] Siblings are often referred to as friends rather than family members, underscoring the connection between sibling relationships and peer relationships. Like the collages on friendship, most of these collages use images from the mainstream media to identify interests and activities their producers share with their siblings (*n=6*). In addition, most of the collages about sibling relationships represent the bond between same-sex siblings. Only one collage about siblings explores the relationship between a female student and her brother. This finding is consistent with the preference girls seem to exhibit for homosocial groups in their collages on friendship.

The collages about child-parent relationships represent more complicated and ambiguous emotions than those about siblings. As a result, collages about family

[6] The only exception is a collage that represents the difficulties of having a sibling move away.

relationships explore both positive and negative dimensions of family life, depicting families as sites of belonging in the case of collages about siblings as well as sites of conflict and even trauma in the case of collages about parents. Of the four collages on parent-child relationships, three address conflict as a central theme. For example, one collage entitled "Family Secrets" contrasts the happy-endings represented in fairytales to the student's lived experience of family life. This collage uses an image of Cinderella to articulate the artist's sense of loss regarding her relationship with her father. During workshop sessions, the student indicated that her father, who no longer lives with her, used to call her "his little princess." Another poignant example explores the realities of abuse, focusing specifically on violence against women and girls perpetuated by male family members. The third collage in this category uses the slogan from the popular Plan International "Because I am a Girl" campaign to discuss her sense of empowerment in her family, especially in terms of her relationship with her mother (Fig. 7). The producers of these examples drew on messages from the mainstream media in order to make sense of their personal experiences with parental conflict.

Interestingly, all three collages described above address issues that have underlying gendered connotations. For example, in the collage "Family Secrets," the artist's father's absence is represented as affecting the artist herself as well as her mother, subtly referencing the realities of single motherhood. The collage on abuse raises questions about the impact of violence against women on themselves and their families. In addition, the collage that draws on the "Because I am a Girl" campaign highlights the ways in which gender expectations may be passed down from mother to child, identifying intergenerational relationships between women as a site of potential conflict over gender norms.

The artist of this last example adopts the motif of roses and thorns to talk about how her relationship with her mother is complex (Fig. 7). For this student, the roses represent the

positive aspects of this relationship, acknowledging that under her mother's care she has developed into a strong and beautiful young woman. The thorns, which form a visual barrier between her and her mother, represent the tensions and conflicts that have developed in their relationship as she has matured. The parental figure (though non-gendered in the representation, she talked about the collage as being specifically about her relationship with her mother) wags a disciplinary finger at the figure of the young girl, who rolls her eyes and crosses her arms in defiance. A photograph of the artist cupping her hands over her ears and shutting her eyes reinforces the message that she is resisting some kind of parental pressure.

The words "Because I am a girl, I can change the world" are reproduced at the bottom of the collage. This affirmative statement about female empowerment counters another taken from the campaign: "Because I am a girl, I eat if there's food leftover when everyone else is done." This reference suggests that the artist has been taught that certain behaviours, such as making herself unobtrusive and deferring to others, are respectable for girls. One of the ways she adheres to these rules is by letting others eat before eating herself. It is unclear whether or not the student sees any relationship between this attitude toward eating and media messages about body image. Several other girls' collages, however, draw attention to the effects of media representations of female bodies on their sense of self-esteem. One student, for example, describes how issues she has with her physical appearance have affected the level of confidence she has in her romantic relationships.

iii. On Love

Of the collages that explore the theme of love, only four are specifically about romantic relationships. The rest explore the theme of love in a generalized or symbolic way, linking it to such concepts as "world peace" and "living with heart." Grade eight students produced all the collages specifically about romantic love. However, romance also appears as a subtheme

in collages about friendship (*n=7*). Though grade seven girls did not make collages specifically about romantic relationships, they did reference romance in their collages about friendship, producing four of the seven collages of this type.

Since "children are pressed into a rigid heterosexual mold" from very young ages, it is perhaps not surprising that none of the collages focusing on romantic love explore homosexual subject matter (Myers & Raymond, 2010, 169). With the exception of one collage that discusses romance in very general terms and therefore does not depict a particular sexual orientation, all romance-themed collages represent heterosexual relationships.[7] Nonetheless, the collages about romance and sexuality explore a range of themes. For example, one student investigates how her experience with romantic relationships differs from the ways in which romantic relationships are represented in the media (Fig. 8). Another talks about her desire to be loved, drawing connections between this desire and representations of beauty in the media (Fig. 9). Other themes explored in the students' collages about romance include the realities of a painful breakup (Fig. 10) and uncertainty about romantic love (Fig. 11).

Only a few students (*n=4*) chose to discuss romance by drawing explicitly on personal experience. One of the most interesting collages in this regard is entitled "I don't know where to go from here" (Fig. 9) This collage expresses the producer's desire to be loved as well as her confusion about what qualities she should possess in order to be more desirable herself. Clippings from girls' fashion magazines about beauty are juxtaposed with the artist's comments, revealing how she tries to make sense of these messages in the context of her everyday life. In one section, the following words, cut-and-pasted from magazines, are

[7] Though no girls explored the theme of homosexuality in their collages about romance, one girl did address this theme in an expressive poem produced for another component of the research project. This was the only direct reference to homosexual desire included in the student zines. The student who produced this poem opted to make her collage about friendship.

grouped together: “Change IS NOT Easy.” The word “prettier,” in large cursive, pink writing, is pasted above these words along with numerous other references to messages about female bodies. Taken together this cluster of words makes a multilayered statement. By indicating that “change” is not easy, the student appears to not only be arguing that media messages instruct girls how to “improve” their physical appearance, but also that achieving beauty standards promoted by the media is difficult.

When read in the context of the rest of the collage, however, this message about beauty ideals takes on additional complexity. Another statement that commands the viewer’s attention in the collage is the cut-and-paste phrase “I Want to BE loved.” When this statement is considered in relation to the handwritten text on the left-hand side of the collage, it becomes clear that this student is not only grappling with media messages about beauty but also with what beauty has to do with romantic love. The use of the word “prettier” is particularly interesting in this regard because it implies comparison or competition between girls about who is more beautiful or desirable. Competition among girls for boys was explored by other students more explicitly, appearing most often in the written work they produced for the zines. In addition to this subtle reference to competition between girls for male attention, the student explores her desire to be loved in relation to media representations of desirable women.

For example, the student adds the words “Does it matter” to excerpts from a magazine article about body type,[8] suggesting that she is trying to understand why certain women are more desirable than others. As a result, this collage raises interesting questions about young girls’ understandings of media messages about female bodies, especially those that teach

[8] Though girls’ magazines have begun to include articles on “dressing for your body type” in an effort to present different kinds of beauty to their young readers, the diversity included in these articles is usually not carried throughout the rest of the magazine. Most other articles and advertisements in these magazines, in keeping with the trend in fashion advertising in general, depict women who are thin. Sometimes even articles on body type do not represent a diversity of body types at all (Acciardo, 2011).

them to "look good" sometimes more for others, particularly men, than themselves. Though beauty can indeed be a source of empowerment for women, the question of who women are looking good for – themselves or others – is important to consider. This female student enters into this debate, drawing on personal experience to articulate how she thinks media messages about female bodies operate in her daily life to manufacture desire.

To elucidate how she understands the connection between beauty advice and her romantic life, this student includes candid written reflections on the dissolution of a romantic relationship in her collage. She talks about the changeable nature of this relationship, indicating that "one moment he cares" and "the next he's done." Further, she concludes that her efforts to hold the relationship together are "not enough," suggesting that she is struggling with feelings of inadequacy in her romantic life. The student wrestles to understand these feelings in relation to messages the media sends about what makes women desirable (in the eyes of men). The result is a revealing multilayered statement about the impact of media messages about gender and sexuality on her romantic relationships and self-esteem.

Discussion

Over the past two decades, research on gender socialization has become more sophisticated with new attention given to the ways in which young people actively adopt gender roles sometimes in direct or partial opposition to those imposed by adults and the media. These theories complicate the idea that the socialization of gender norms is a one-way process from adult to child (Thorne, 1993). Such observations suggest that peer groups also play an important role in the ways in which young girls come to understand their gender identities. Analyzing the results of this study, it becomes clear that what it means to be a girl, and thus a

member of certain homosocial groups, is defined and redefined through everyday practices such as discussing fashion, beauty, and boyfriends. These girls, in this sense, take an active role in constructing their own gender identities as well as establishing gender norms within their peer groups.

In her ethnographic study of young adolescent girls' reading habits at home and school, Margaret Finders concludes that the consumption of media messages in teen magazines like *Sassy* was a way for the research participants to legitimize their identities as "normal teenagers" or "regular teens" (1996, 76). She observes that some girls would match their clothes to magazine photographs to demonstrate how their appearance and style was "cool" (Finders, 1996, 76). For these girls, the consumption of teen magazines was a means of "reject[ing] the position of the child" and "defining themselves as teens" (Finders, 1996, 76). This orientation toward teen magazines may in part be explained by the media consumption practices of tween girls as theorized by Claudia Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh (2005/9). According to these scholars, teen magazines have been marketed toward a younger audience of girls in recent years, specifically toward pre-adolescent or middle school cohorts. Countering concerns that this age group is highly susceptible to manipulation by market interests, these scholars insist that tween girls self-consciously engage with mainstream messages about teen culture.

In support of this observation, the girls who participated in this study created collages that demonstrate how they self-consciously engage with media materials. For example, several girls used their collages to directly critique the messages the media sends about body image (Fig. 9), beauty ideals (Fig. 6), and consumerism (Fig. 12). In these specific examples, the girls use a variety of framing techniques and organizational strategies to re-interpret the media materials they use. By juxtaposing excerpts from the mainstream media with reflections on how media messages impact their daily lives, these girls' collages present

multilayered accounts of their experiences in relation to a variety of dominant discourses about girlhood. In these instances, the collage activity seemed to offer students a way to visualize "thick desire," a term used by Michelle Fine and Sara McClelland to refer to young people's entitlement to safe relationships, sexual and reproductive freedom, equitable education, and meaningful political engagement (2006, 300). Several girls openly talk about their desires through their collages, pointing out problems in media representations of girlhood and articulating what they want to change about these representations, and why.

The majority of the students' collages, however, incorporate media materials in more complicated ways (Fig. 1). These collages demonstrate their producers' self-conscious engagement with media materials while simultaneously revealing the powerful influence of the market over what teenaged girlhood means. The producers of these collages deliberately chose media images to communicate what they think is important about themselves and their relationships – a practice that requires a more critical distance than mere mimesis of media messages. When asked to describe their reasoning behind their choice of media images, many girls responded by saying that they chose images that they and their friends "*liked*." When asked to describe what they liked about the images, most girls talked about how they represented activities they do with their friends (i.e. shopping, doing their hair and makeup, having sleepovers, watching movies). Inclusion of imagery they "like" can be read as an assertion of agency over their consumption practices. However, though girls are indeed capable of making their own decisions about what they like or not, they are still susceptible – as we all are – to the persuasive techniques of marketing. However, the majority of the girls' collages do not clearly demonstrate they understand how marketing techniques work to manufacture desire – that is, "how we come to want what we want" (Walkerdine, 1990).

As a result, these collages raise important questions about how girls understand media messages about femininity and girlhood. Feminist scholars have argued that body and beauty

ideals can be internalized and naturalized to such an extent that girls cannot see how they are culturally contingent and socially mandated, instead viewing them "as springing from their innermost selves" (Carlisle Duncan, 1994, 50). From a very early age girls internalize the cultural codes of femininity, measuring themselves against photos of celebrities and models. This is not to say, however, that girls interpret media messages uncritically. Nonetheless, an account of the girls' collages would be incomplete without a consideration of the ways in which ideals of femininity appear to play an important role in shaping what girlhood means to their producers. The inclusion of media images in these collages is then simultaneously about expressing their personal identities as cultural agents with unique interests and purchasing power as well as claiming a shared identity as a "regular teen" alongside other girls of the same age.

However, claiming a shared identity as a "regular teen" also involves participating in a predominately heteronormative culture. Reflecting on their study of preadolescent girls' understandings of gender and sexuality, Kristen Meyers and Laura Raymond conclude that heteronormativity "not only emerges from the gender divide but is also reproduced by and for the girls themselves" (2010, 170). The findings of this research support this observation. For example, the prevalence of references to boys in collages about friendship suggests that heterosexuality is a powerful normative social force among same-sex friends.

Though the girls frequently represented love shared between same-sex friends, homosexual desire was not explicitly addressed in their collages. This silence around homosexuality draws attention to the ways in which mainstream discourses that assume girls to be "not-yet-straight" create a social environment in which heterosexuality is a compulsory norm, thus making the expression of homoerotic feelings between friends difficult (Stockton, 2009, 7). During middle school, concerns about adolescent (hetero)sexuality lead to

heightened surveillance of boys and girls and their interactions, thus reinforcing homosocial friendship groups as the norm and making the expression of homosexual desire difficult.

Despite the tendency for school practices to silence conversations about sexuality, several girls express desire for opposite-sex partners through their collages. Though referencing heterosexual romance is common for girls this age, such references rarely surface in formal school assignments – like the collages. Interestingly, in most collages that reference boys, the girls' crushes are not their peers but celebrities: idealized sex symbols who are usually in their late teens, several years older than the girls themselves. It is possible that some girls may have opted to include imagery of their celebrity crushes because they did not feel comfortable including direct reference to their real-life crushes or boyfriends in their collages. In this regard, a recent study that examined girls' idolization of male celebrities reveals that girls who have serious celebrity crushes are more likely to have experience dating same-age boys (Engle & Kasser, 2005). These findings suggest that some girls this age are actively pursuing romantic relationships with the potential for sexual involvement, and thus emphasis should be placed on giving them the relational tools they need to articulate their desires and avoid health-compromising behaviours.

As a result, the collages about romantic relationships analyzed in this report present a challenge to current trends in health education in Ontario that restrict the discussion of sexuality with intermediate level students to the delivery of sterile facts about sexually transmitted infections and the promotion of abstinence as the best method of prevention. These collages reveal that their producers have many questions about romantic relationships, questions that warrant the attention of educators and policymakers alike. The sophisticated and heartfelt manner in which these girls engage with the theme of love through their collages suggests that they have had experience with romantic relationships that were emotionally significant. Within these relationships they have probably experienced, though

perhaps not acted on, some kind of sexual attraction as well. As a result, these collages offer important insight into how young girls think about their romantic relationships and sexual agency.

Recommendations

Applying the findings detailed above to pedagogical practice, educators are encouraged to consider the following when developing health education programmes for tween girls. Though these recommendations relate specifically to programmes for girls, the strategies listed below would be beneficial for co-educational initiatives to adopt as well.

1. *Incorporate media literacy as a fundamental component of health education:*

Youth have reported that the media is one of their key sources of information on relationships and health (Flicker et al, 2009; Brown and L'Engle, 2009). Since the media can also be a source of misinformation and stigmatization, researchers have demonstrated the benefits of teaching media literacy at the same time as health literacy (Walsh et al, 2002; Switzer, 2009). In addition, there is evidence that youth appreciate health education programmes that incorporate media messages and materials, indicating that such programmes take their desire to learn about relationships "more seriously" than others (Bragg, 2006, 330). These observations suggest that the integration of health literacy and media literacy may serve to enhance students' learning in both subject areas.

2. *Position girls as cultural producers:*

Many researchers and educators have demonstrated that positioning youth as cultural producers affords them important opportunities to articulate what they think is important with

regards to issues of gender and sexuality (Walsh, et al, 2002; Tao & Mitchell, 2010; Mitchell et al, 2005). In addition, educational programmes that position youth as both knowledge producers and knowledge consumers empower them to investigate how media messages are created, for whom and under what assumptions (Walsh et al, 2002; Bragg, 2006). Adopting "a youth as cultural producers framework" can also help teachers and facilitators understand the issues that are most important to the youth they are working with, thus assisting them in identifying sites for future pedagogical intervention (Tao & Mitchell, 2010).

Limitations

The girls' collages analyzed in this report offer valuable insights into the ways they understand their relationships with their peers, families, and romantic partners. These collages also demonstrate how the girls' relationships are mediated by media representations and social perceptions about gender and sexuality. The qualitative research methods used to gather this data, however, do not lead to generalizable results. As a result, the collages accompanying this analysis should be interpreted with caution. Nonetheless, there is an extensive body of literature, some of which is cited in this paper, which supports the findings presented here.

Whereas many researchers who conduct research within schools use participant-observation as a key method of data collection, attempting to align themselves with the students rather than the teachers, by virtue of my position as "guest teacher" it was more difficult for me to "fit in" with the students. Though I tried to challenge the power dynamics between my students and myself, emphasizing the collaborative orientation of community art and asking the students to call me by my first name, I was still in a position of authority. I taught lessons, ran the classroom, and graded student work. Many students initially resorted

to calling me "Miss Britt" in an attempt to make sense of my role in familiar terms. This strategy of sense-making highlights the dominant relationship between adults and students in the school as one characterized by institutionally mandated rules of conduct and relations of power.

Since this project was conducted within the limits of the classroom, it was therefore by association subject to pre-established conventions about what counts as "school-appropriate." Over their years of schooling, students have learned both what to expect from their teachers and what their teachers expect of them. These learned social codes might have restricted what kinds of experiences the students felt comfortable sharing in their work. Knowing that I was going to read and evaluate their work, some students may have made very conscious decisions about what to share and what to omit. As a result, the thematic content and subject matter of the girls' collages must be interpreted with this context in mind.

In addition, though heterosexuality surfaced as a social norm in the girls' collages, it is important to acknowledge that girls' attitudes toward sexuality are not monolithic. Rather, girls form their own opinions about the subject based on their personal and cultural beliefs, their understanding of various media, and their social interactions with their peers, families, and teachers. Whereas several girls were eager to make collages about romance and/or sexuality, for example, some of their peers deliberately chose other topics. Whereas some girls talked openly about their celebrity crushes or boyfriends during workshop sessions, others expressed no interest in dating while others scoffed at the idea. As a result, the girls who participated in this study held multiple viewpoints on sexuality and romance – many of which never surfaced in their collages. Those girls who were uninterested in dating or disapproved of the idea chose to make collages about other themes. Furthermore, girls who were questioning their sexuality may not have felt comfortable exploring these questions in

an environment in which heterosexuality is the dominant, if not compulsory, norm. Unfortunately, this analysis does not include their perspectives.

Conclusion

Aware that tween girls consume media that contain overt and covert messages about gender and sexuality, educational programmes directed at this cohort should empower girls to analyze how media messages are constructed and for what reasons. A study of 12- and 13-year-old girls' interpretations of teen magazines, including *Teen*, *Seventeen*, *YM*, and *Sassy*, concluded that the "girls seemed ill equipped to critically analyze magazines' images of the feminine physique, even when they recognized these images did not accurately reflect the girls they knew" (Duke, 2000, 368). Though the findings presented in this paper suggest that girls are not passive consumers of media materials, more work needs to be done to enhance girls' critical media skills to raise their awareness of how media messages manufacture desire.

However, for tween girls, the consumption of media marketed toward teens is often an act of rebellion against what adults deem appropriate. Girls' consumption practices are also often a way for them to declare their independence and signal their maturity. As a result, the appropriation of these media by educational programmes to expose the ways in which their messages are constructed could potentially be less effective than we might hope. We must think deeply about both the power and appeal of unsanctioned literacies and devise strategies for equipping our female students with critical tools they can use outside the classroom. Furthermore, since these images of beauty and fashion can be a source of empowerment – albeit a complicated and conflicted one – for young girls, we might do more damage than good by critiquing them without actively engaging girls in the process. For example, we

might be dismissed as ‘just not getting it.’ (Are we convinced that we do ‘get it’ in the first place?) Moreover, by disavowing the sense of empowerment these girls’ derive from such media messages, we run the risk of failing to see the ways in which girls engage with these media messages in critical and productive ways.

As a result, we need to invent creative pedagogical strategies that challenge assumptions made by media about gender and sexuality but still acknowledge media as a source of empowerment for girls. Incorporating unsanctioned literacies of more radical orientations into educational programmes might be an effective way to balance these interests. Girls could be asked to compare and contrast the content of mainstream magazines with their countercultural alternatives – like zines made by other youth. This approach, similar to a mediated form of peer education, could inspire girls to reflect on the intended function of media messages, comparing and contrasting these intentions with the ways the alternative media have appropriated these messages. In addition, positioning girls as cultural producers in media literacy initiatives can be an empowering way to actively engage them in media analysis. These pedagogical approaches have the potential to empower girls to come up with alternative interpretations of their favourite media materials rather than prescribe certain ways of thinking about those materials. This latter strategy is more likely to be met with resistance and backfire.

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Figure 1
Grade 8 Student

Figure 2
Grade 8 Student

Figure 3
Grade 7 Student

Figure 4
"Cut from the Same Cloth"
Grade 8 Student

Figure 5
Grade 8 Student

Figure 6
"The Way I See It"
Grade 7 Student

Figure 7
“Rose and Thorns”
Grade 7 Student

Figure 8
Grade 8 Student

Figure 9
"I Don't Know Where to Go From Here"
Grade 8 Student

Figure 10
“Opposite Worlds”
Grade 8 Student

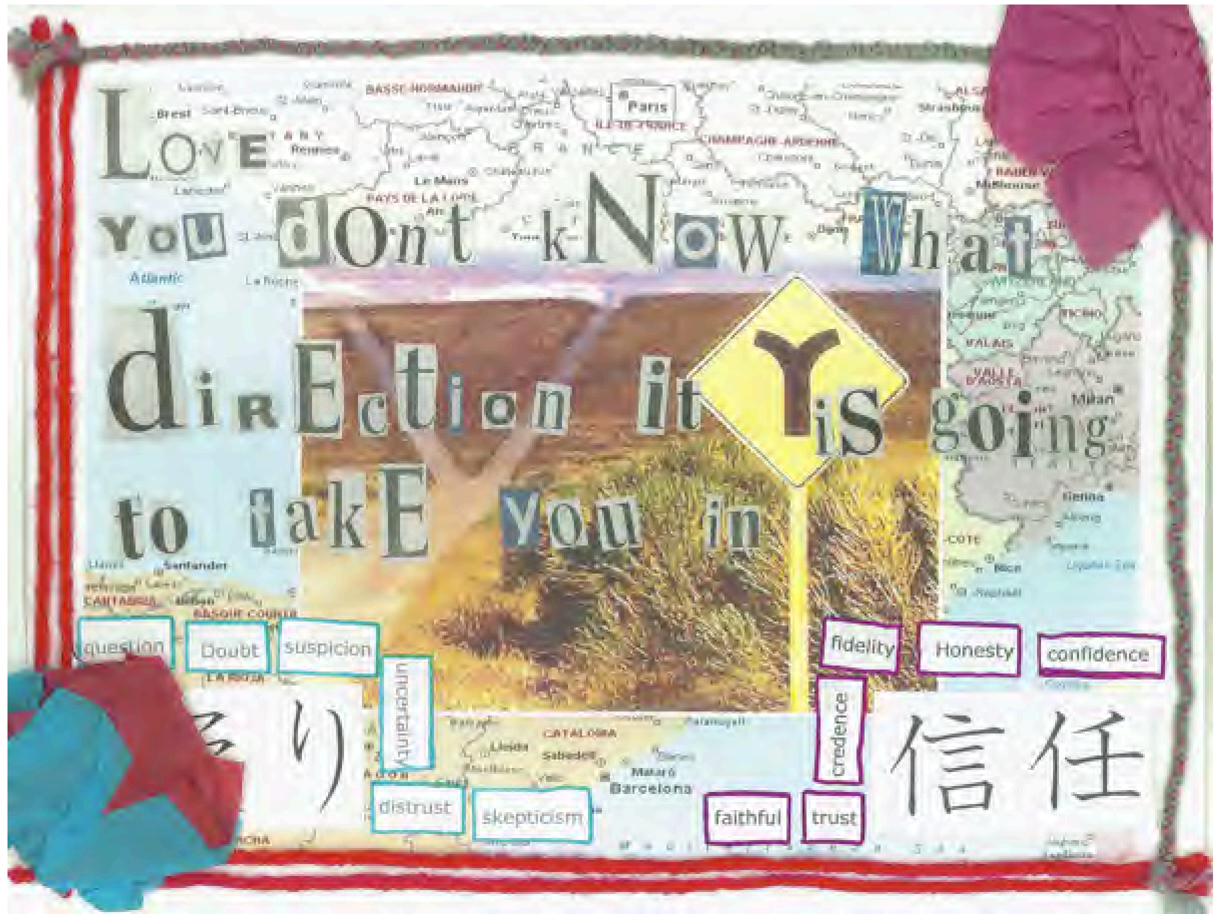

Figure 11
"A Fork in the Road"
Grade 8 Student

Figure 12
"Tug of War"
Grade 8 Student