

'WHAT YOU WEAR TELLS A LOT ABOUT YOU': GIRLS DRESS UP ONLINE

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ABSTRACT

This article reports findings from a study in which twenty-six girls aged 12 – 13 took part in workshops at a specialist ICT centre connected to a school in inner-city London. The girls explored and discussed fashion as presented online, and they produced their own interactive fashion design webpages, making decisions about body shapes, types of clothing and audience. The article analyses interview data, looking at statements girls made in the context of discursive practices around body image, pleasures of play and self-confidence. The analysis examines the role of structure and agency in girls' discussions about fashion media and argues that the agency offered to girls is structured by neoliberal discourses. As girls draw on these discourses, they enter into complex and often conflicting negotiations, rendering themselves as seemingly active agents who are making politicised arguments, and at the same time restricting their possible subject positions.

In 2002 the UK chain store Argos withdrew its line of thong underwear (G-strings) for teens and preteens due to pressure from parents, child-protection groups, psychologists and even members of parliament who argued, amongst other things, that the sale of such items of clothing would lead to a dramatic increase in child molestations (York, 2002). This has been followed by campaigns aimed at banning the sale of particular bras and underwear around the UK. In May 2006, for example, the leader of the UK's Conservative Party spoke out against the selling of 'padded bras and sexy knickers', saying the 'the protection of childhood innocence against premature sexualisation is something worth fighting for' (Morris and Roberts, 2006, n.p.). Public anxiety toward young teens wearing thongs along with short skirts and high heels draws on views of adolescent girls

as children, not yet women; girls as innocent and at risk of being tainted by sex or preyed on by older men; and fears of girls growing older quicker (Buckingham, 2000; Torell, 2004). Here, powerful structures, particularly commercial media, are seen to be corrupting innocent youth.

On the other hand, arguments have been made that teenage girls' dress, even questionably 'sexy' dress, is a demonstration of empowerment. As opposed to traditional notions of girls as passive to and constrained by an industry which positions them as sex objects, girls are seen as demonstrating their confidence, expressing their opinions, having fun and celebrating their entrance to womanhood through their dress (McRobbie, 1999; Rocamora, 2004). Similar arguments have been made in relation to women's dress, showing that women use clothes to perform their identity, at times conforming to cultural norms and other times subverting or rejecting them (Wilson, 1987). Here, girls and women are seen to have agency to resist (to some extent) the hegemonic discourses of the fashion industry. However, theories in relation to the 'consumer citizen' have raised questions about how seemingly free choice of consumer goods is part of a 'technology of the self' (using Foucault's concept), which, in fact, regulates and manages individual subjectivities (Harris, 2004; Rose, 1999).

Through these arguments, girls are given a number of often contradictory discourses upon which to draw and against which to position themselves. As young teens, girls are gaining independence within their family in social and

financial matters, giving them more choice in what they wear, who they see and what leisure activities they pursue. Teen girls are at a point in their lives when defining and performing their subject positions becomes complicated as they become subject to discourses not only around children, but also around women.

In this article I argue that analyses which describes girls either as subjects of negative effects of media images or as active agents who are employing media and fashion as cultural resources are both problematic, overlooking things girls are doing and leaving issues unresolved. By focusing on the negative effects of media, we overlook times when girls express awareness and critique of the ways they are being positioned by media. Similarly, by celebrating girls' active resistance to or transformation of popular culture, we can simplify the powerful structures in girls' lives and overlook the complex ways girls are negotiating those structures. More importantly, we can overlook particular narrative codes which the girls are buying into. By examining girls' interactions with consumer media cultures in terms of particular discursive practices, we can see how they carefully navigate through the contradictory structures, rather than simply refashioning themselves, as neoliberal discourse would suggest (Walkerdine, 2004). In particular, the analysis of the data in this article demonstrates that girls' apparently empowered statements can be seen as part of the 'incitement to discourse' which is produced through neoliberal ideologies regarding consumer citizens (Harris, 2004). This analysis shows nuanced ways in which girls are being managed and regulated through the 'project of the reflexive self' (Giddens,

1991: 32). The aim of this article is to provide empirical evidence which will look past the structure-agency dichotomy to see how, as Giddens describes, human agency and social structure act *through* each other.

The focus of this article is on pre-teen and teen girls' consumption of fashion and digital media. This focus stems from a very popular online activity – dressing up online fashion figures (known as dollmaker or paperdoll sites). These simple drop and drag activities are readily available online and were used by a large majority of the girls I studied across three research sites. The curvaceous online dolls include hundreds of clothing items (including sexually provocative ones), as well as changes in hair, eyes, and skin colour (see Figure 1). The activities are similar to setting up a *Sims* computer character, another popular game with girls across the three research sites. Furthermore, the idea of dressing up dolls, particularly the types of dolls found online, clearly relates to girls' play with Barbie and more recent fashion dolls, such as Bratz. Finally, attention to and experimentation with clothing style is a prominent discourse in teen magazines (see Currie, 1999). The focus on online dress-up, therefore, draws on girls' experiences from a young age and also connects with activities which are part of the popular culture of the girls I was studying.

Figure 1: Dollmaker designs¹



Background – children, media and the female body

Looking first at discursive practices which define children, one of the frequent popular arguments is that children are growing older quicker, as indicated in the opening references to girls wearing thongs. The premise that media have caused the ‘disappearance of childhood’, as Postman argued in his book of that title in 1983, is also found in David Elkhind’s *The Hurried Child* (1981) and Marie Winn’s *Children without Childhood* (1984). According to these authors, there has been a blurring or even erasure of the boundary between childhood and adulthood due partly to children’s exposure to adult topics (through media) and partly to the lack of relaxed free-play time (i.e. children are on adult type schedules). Within this

¹ Designs made on ‘Josie’s Dollz’ <http://www.over-the-moon.org/dollz/> (accessed 2 March 2007).

'moral panic' stance, people argue that in contrast to previous generations of children, today children are rushed into adult roles before they are ready either psychologically or physically. Yet as Buckingham concludes, 'writers like Marie Winn and Neil Postman explicitly draw on one of the most seductive post-Romantic *fantasies* of childhood: the notion of a pre-industrial Golden Age, an idyllic Garden of Eden in which children could play freely, untainted by corruption' (2000: 35, original emphasis). However, girls are not just portrayed as naturally innocent and easily corrupted by media. Walkerdine (1997) describes how media images, particularly adverts, often eroticize girls, positioning them as seductive 'little Lollitas'. Discussions around girls and fashion, therefore, are fused with complex and contradictory discourses – ones which position girls as corrupted by adverts of, for example, sexually provocative clothing, yet at the same time as alluring and dangerous models of those clothes. Girls, therefore, are subject to these contradictory discourses which position them as both sexual and asexual, threatening and innocent, and above all, in need of protection.

Also in public discourse is concern about the effects of media on girls' and women's body image. In this tradition, Chernin (1994) analyses what she terms 'the tyranny of slenderness' which is created by men's desire for slender, non-threatening women. Focusing on women with eating disorders, Chernin describes the oppression of these women who feel they need to be small, quiet and submissive in order to gain men's approval. Similarly, Wolf (1991) analyses what she terms the 'beauty myth' which pervades women's media saturated

lives. According to Wolf, women are bombarded by unrealistic images of beauty through various media forms such as advertisements, movies and music videos portraying stereotypically slender models with perfect skin and hair. The myth is reinforced by diet, cosmetic and plastic surgery industries which capitalize on women's inevitable insecurities which are created by the beauty myth. This view of women as damaged by media images is also reflected in writing about adolescence. Pipher (2002) blames 'the girl-poisoning culture', that is the look-obsessed media saturated American society, for causing a threat to girls' identities which are suppressed as they go through puberty. According to Pipher, instead of stabilising and developing their individual identities as they move towards womanhood, girls conform to the idea that appearance is everything, and they repress any form of individuality.

These and other studies which connect body dissatisfaction with images in the media fall broadly under the media effects tradition (see also, Harrison and Cantor, 1997; Hofschire and Greenberg, 2002; Myers and Biocca, 1992). Coming from mainstream sociology and behaviourist psychology, effects researchers take as their starting point the idea that media cause particular behaviours in their audience (see Barker and Petley, 1997, for an overview and critique of the 'media effects' debate). This research implicitly defines children as passive and uncritical readers of media texts and makes the assumption that the text is 'all powerful'. In contrast, 'active audience' research is based on the theory that the meaning of texts is constructed by the viewer, resulting in varying

interpretations of any given text. Audiences in this role are able to resist dominant ideologies, reject meanings or messages from texts, enjoy a text without being affected by some implicit negative ideology, and use texts for their own purposes. However, as Buckingham (1993) argues, this approach simplifies readings of media by describing viewers as wholly autonomous, able to reflect and act upon their own needs and desires.

In feminist media studies, adopting a poststructuralist view has created a move to recognise the different, often contradictory, ways of engaging with media texts. Studies on women and soap operas, for example, describe two modes of engagement: one is a critical mode in which the viewers are detached and express comments about the constructed nature of the shows; and the other is more involved and personal, identifying themselves and their lives in particular characters and narratives (Hobson, 1990; Katz and Liebes, 1990; Seiter et al 1989). These studies point to a need to consider multiple ways people engage with media texts as well as the importance of doing qualitative audience research. In relation to teen girls and media, McRobbie (1991) makes a similar argument, criticising content analyses of teen magazines and calling for accounts from readers and magazine publishers in order to gain a better understanding of girls' interactions with these media texts.

More recently, feminists have asked questions about the 'undoing of feminism' by a new generation of young women who, having grown up in a postfeminist society, no longer see a need for feminism (McRobbie, 2004; Taft, 2004).

Various researchers have voiced concern over the way accounts of individualised subjects act to constrain women (Harris, 2004; McRobbie, 2004; Walkerdine, 2004). McRobbie argues that an assumption of gender equality (assumed to be achieved by second-wave feminists) in conjunction with discourses around choice and agency (as individualised postfeminist subjects) creates 'adherence to new unfolding forms of femininity' (2004: 11). These researchers use theories of identity in late modernity in order to analyse girls' and women's interactions in consumer cultures. Consumerism can be seen as a 'technology of the self' - referring to Foucault's notion of the mechanisms through which people present and 'police' their selves in society. For example, advertising and make-over features in magazines and on television suggest ways in which clothes, cosmetics and various body treatments can transform the self through altering appearance (Cronin, 2000). This is combined with Giddens' idea of the reflexive self – the idea that we are continuously working on and reflecting on our identity – and the idea that we choose, develop and project a 'lifestyle'. Giddens writes, 'Modernity opens up the project of the self, but under conditions strongly influenced by the standardising effects of commodity capitalism' (1991: 196). Consumer cultures offer models of lifestyle and of the self, and part of the project of the reflexive self is a struggle to question the models that are presented to us. Rose (1991,1999) takes this a step further by analysing ways

that neoliberal consumer cultures offer new ways of understanding the self – understandings that are based on ‘norms of autonomy and self-realisation’ which translate into discourses of freedom, choice and individuality (1991, n.p.).

These ideas offer new ways of analysing consumer cultures – and in particular, the complex ways in which subjectivities are being positioned through discourses around agency. Harris (2004) highlights the importance of analysing the role of young women in accounts of late modernity, as women become key workers in the new economy. Harris describes how discourses creating the late modern subject position are constructing ‘the idea that good choices, effort, and ambition alone are responsible for success that has come to separate the can-dos from the at-risks’ (16). The agency offered to girls in a discourse of choice is working through particular structures. Therefore, we need to consider how we can go beyond the structure-agency debate and beyond a debate that ends up by saying, ‘it’s both things and it’s complex’. In what seems a surprising turn-around from her influential work on teen girls as magazine readers, McRobbie (2005) has come out against notions of ‘girl power’, blaming these discourses on the absence of young activists today: ‘So enthralled are young women by the seductive power of the media that critical faculties have been blunted. Female students, the very group who should be challenging these assumptions, are silent’ (n.p.). It is urgent, therefore, that we examine how young women understand and employ these new discourses.

The study

In order to engage with girls in discussion about their fashion activities and the surrounding discursive practices, I organised workshops in which girls age 12 – 13 designed their own fashion webpages. The workshops were conducted in November 2004 and February 2005 at a specialist ICT (Information and Communications Technology) centre connected to a school in inner-city London. I contacted the school as a researcher from the local university, requesting to work with a group of girls on an ICT/media studies project. I had a (female) web designer/practitioner to help with the teaching, and neither of us had worked with these girls previously. The school had been an all boys school several years before, and boys still outnumbered girls. The school was enthusiastic about the prospect of giving girls extra time with ICT, and girls were suggested for the workshops by the form tutor based on various individual factors (eg. a perceived need to gain more confidence and have more ICT experience, a perceived need to be recognised for the informal ICT skills they had developed through their own online activities). The school established a computer club for girls after these workshops, and these girls formed the initial core of that group.

As a new visitor to the school, I requested that a group of girls be recruited that would reflect the population of the school – and I was told that the girls who were recruited were of mixed ability, some with behaviour difficulties, and from different ethnic backgrounds. The group of girls, therefore, were representative

of the school population, which was ethnically diverse (about 75 per cent of the pupils on roll were from minority ethnic groups, the largest being African Caribbean followed by Bangladeshi). At the time, sixty percent of the pupils at the school spoke English as an additional language, although less than 5% of the pupils were new to English. Nearly half the pupils at the school had special educational needs. Generally, the pupils came from backgrounds which reflect mixed but, overall, considerable levels of social and financial hardship. A high proportion of the pupils were eligible for free school meals.

The school arranged for girls to be taken off their regular time table to take part in the two workshops which ran over five days. We did a series of activities which alternated between planning and drawing with pencils and paper and then working on computers, using the software programme Flash for designing. The girls worked in groups to produce a page of figures, clothing and accessories for a drop and drag website (<http://tinyurl.com/ywfwzsq>). All the girls' names used in this article are pseudonyms.

Using participant media production is becoming increasingly popular within media and cultural studies methodologies (e.g. de Block and Sefton-Green, 2004; Bloustein, 1998; Goldman-Segal, 1998). In the case of this study, I was using media production as a way of gaining access to girls' understanding of their own media consumption practices. The production activities facilitated discussions about debates about girls and media, as described in the previous

section of this article, and provided a range of data for analysis. In the workshops, the girls focused specifically on designing drop and drag fashion pages, similar to the websites they use. Through their designs the girls had to make decisions about the styles of clothing, the shapes of the bodies, the range of clothing on offer, and the specific cuts of clothing (necklines and skirt hemlines, for example). The visual designs provided data in themselves, and I also recorded conversations the girls had during the design process. Furthermore, the designs offered a springboard from which to launch into more direct conversations about girls, fashion and media. At the end of the workshops, I conducted semi-structured interviews to discuss general ICT usage, specific design processes, fashion choices and awareness of adult anxieties toward fashion and various dress-up activities. These interviews were conducted in small groups (2 to 4 girls), based on the groups that the girls had established when working on their designs. Because the girls chose their own work groups, the interview groups consisted of friends. This article will focus primarily on data collected from the interviews.

One of the concerns with doing interviews is the power relationship which is embedded in context of the interview, and this is especially relevant for an educator or teacher interviewing pupils. The role of a teacher involves being in the powerful position of assessor, someone who determines whether the pupils are seen as successful, someone who has contact with the pupil's parents - basically someone whose opinion of pupils matters. The interviews in this study

were conducted within the discursive practices of an educator-pupil setting. However, as an outsider, I tried to disrupt the balance by having the girls call me by my first name, providing snacks, discussing leisure activities and dressing informally. Furthermore, I did not have as much power as a teacher – I was not assessing their work, and I had no contact with parents and only brief contact with their form tutor. Indeed, some of the girls were very disruptive during the interviews, holding their own conversations instead of answering my questions. However, the questions I asked established a formal relationship within an educational setting, and the responses are analysed within this framework. Another contextual feature of the interviews which is accounted for in the analysis is the situation of a female interviewer in all female groups discussing fashion (amongst other topics). Given the amount of public discussion around girls and fashion as described in the previous section, the girls had an awareness of themselves as subjects in these debates. Separating them from the boys in their school for a special project and having a university researcher ask them specific questions about these debates, further emphasised their position as research subjects. Finally, as the girls were friends, accounts of friendships and talk are considered in the analysis.

Drawing on theories from feminist media studies, as outlined in the previous section, my analysis of the girls' talk in the context of interviews goes beyond the face-value of statements the children made. As Potter and Wetherell (1987) describe, 'people's talk fulfils many functions and has varying effects' (p.168). I

use the interviews to look at how girls position themselves within the context of the social event of the interviews, as well as how they construct meaning about themselves, others, and the surrounding discourses. Through data-led discourse analysis, themes emerged broadly in relation to my theoretical stance. The themes highlight the dual nature of subject positioning as girls are both positioned by and through discursive practices surrounding them.

The three themes which I will cover in this article are body image, pleasures of doll play, and self-confidence. In the first theme, the girls position themselves as resistant to media discourses, and in doing so they demonstrate how agency is framed by discourses concerning individualism and choice. In the second theme, the girls' statements about playing with dolls and fashion are analysed to reveal both the pleasures of such play as well as meanings girls are making of particular consumer structures. Finally, girls' statements about confidence and self-esteem in connection with dress are analysed in terms of discourses around individualism and autonomy. By using discourse analysis to investigate the processes, which the girls go through as they discuss and interact with fashion, we can see the complexities as they both critique particular discourses and also position themselves through surrounding discursive practices.

Body image – monitoring the self

During the workshops, the girls did an activity in which they designed and made a sales pitch for a fashion website. The girls discussed audiences for their site,

and body shape emerged as part of those discussions. Most of the groups were careful to include clothes 'for bigger people' as well as for 'slim people', expressing an awareness of body shape as a sensitive issue. For example, Mackenzie comments on her clothing designs for different shaped bodies: 'you don't want to reveal a lot if the person's big, you just have to think about people's feelings'.

In the interviews I asked two related questions: 'when you're drawing, how do you decide the shape of the body?' and 'do you think adults worry about girls reading fashion magazines, or playing with fashion dolls or dollmaker websites?'. Body dissatisfaction emerged in discussions of these questions, and the girls referred to adults and older teens as being anxious about their bodies, more so than themselves. This 'third-person effect' (the belief that others are more affected by media than oneself) is well-documented in media research (see Perloff, 1993). The girls in my study indicate that it is other people who are affected by Wolf's (1991) 'beauty myth' - somehow the girls do not see themselves as being subject to the same ideologies in the same way as older teens. They can identify and resist 'the tyranny of slenderness' (Chernin, 1994) while others cannot. The following are examples of ways girls use the third person effect in discussions about body anxiety:

VALERIE: Most teenagers when they go on a diet they starve themselves.

DALIA: When they grow up, yeah, they could, like, worry about themselves, and they could do exercise or have a diet.

NEYLAN: They might start thinking, 'Ah, maybe I should diet.' And they might do it too much. Or eat less fat and sugar.

MACKENZIE: They'll want plastic surgery so they can be perfect 'cuz they think they're not as pretty.

The girls showed an awareness of body dissatisfaction and recognition that girls (or teenagers) compare themselves to an ideal image. On the one hand, the statements above appear politicized – the girls are resisting media influences, analysing the 'technologies of the self' which are produced through, for example, television shows which focus on body dissatisfaction (e.g. *Ten Years Younger*, *Extreme Makeover*, *Nip/Tuck*). On the other hand, we can see these statements as part of 'an incitement to discourse' in which the girls' ideas are being carefully managed and regulated. Here the girls are enacting the project of the self, scrutinising their interior lives, and importantly, blaming individuals for failure to maintain a healthy body.

As I will describe below, the girls are drawing on particular educational discourses, positioning themselves as healthy individuals, in control of their self-image and specifically their eating. These discourses reflect the girls' position as

pupils in an interview in a school setting, but the girls are also positioning themselves in relation to the girl friends in the group. By adopting as 'us-them' stance (it is teenagers and older women, not us who are affected), the girls are positioning themselves as a cohesive group, not only as younger but also as less susceptible to 'the tyranny of slenderness' (Chernin, 1994). Furthermore, as a conversation amongst friends, the girls' statements can be seen as part of their construction of identity. Kehily et al (2002) analyse the way talk amongst girl friends provides a space in which normative forms of femininity are established and maintained. This is similar to the ways the girls in the current study discuss eating habits (in the excerpts above) as well as clothing choices:

DANI: I think you should only look nice if you're like going to a party or something special

KEISHA: If you're going to a Christmas party

DANI: If you just go out with really short skirts and all you just look like a right tart

By critiquing particular styles of clothing ('really short skirts') and discussing problems of self-image and eating disorders amongst older girls and women, the girls form a group consensus about what constitutes an appropriate style of dress and a healthy identity for themselves, in opposition to the 'tarty' dress and unhealthy identities of others. This discussion demonstrates how girls are navigating through complex structures which demand self-reflexivity, as we see here, and also individual effort.

As mentioned above, media are clearly informing the girls' discussions, but the girls are also reflecting educational discourses on health issues: exercising and cutting down on fat and sugar is one option, anorexia and plastic surgery another. The girls are drawing on wider public discussions on eating disorders and child obesity. For pre-teens and teens in particular, current debates are reinforcing the importance of being slender (but not too skinny), as Giovanna states: 'say they have too much weight or they're too skinny...say they have put on a lot of weight, and they see a really nice body and everything, they might want to, like, force themselves to lose a lot of weight.' In the UK these debates have resulted in changes in school meals, discussions about regulating food advertisements aimed at children, television programs following obese teens' weight-loss, and additions to the school curriculum in which children are taught both the fat content of foods as well as the dangers of anorexia. These public discussions which dictate that teens must not be too fat but not too skinny provide another example of the way the 'perfect body' image is embedded in the discourses around teens. The construction of an individualised self who is able to make decisions and is responsible for monitoring the self is important to consider in relation to eating disorders.

Evans et al (2002) analyse the way eating disorders (including anorexia as well as obesity) are socially constructed in the context of schools. They describe how a 'culture of healthism' is embedded in the various discursive practices of schools

including texts, curriculum and pedagogy. Importantly, in Rich and Evans' (2005) analysis of interviews with young women with eating disorders, they found that the discursive practices in these women's lives construct various contradictory positions: being individually responsible for their health, being subjects to wider cultural practices (family, education, leisure, health) which influence their self image, and being medically ill. The girls' statements in the current study signal these contradictory positions: it is individuals who 'think they're not as pretty', it is the responsibility of the individual to 'eat less fat and sugar', it is the choice of the individual to 'starve themselves' or have plastic surgery. However, as will be discussed in the final section of this article, the girls also see parents and peers as crucial influences on their choice of clothes and their self-image. Furthermore, the girls discuss media (magazines, pop stars, movies) as influencing self-image, as Dani and Keisha explain:

DANI: I think it's just so when girls are probably in watching the videos and all that the body I think they're like thinking it's going to be like that and when they grow older like there's gonna be a prince

KEISHA: Ya exactly I want to be a princess

In this excerpt, the girls are speculating ('*I think...when girls are probably watching*') about the role of fairy tale narratives and princess-like bodies on girls' expectations of their future. The girls' statements in the current study reflect the complexity of the discourses around body image which offer agency and also contain powerful structures (family and media, for example). Agency to resist the

'tyranny of slenderness' (Chernin, 1994) is evident in the girls' statements as they identify and reject the unhealthy practices of older teens, positioning themselves as somehow less susceptible to powerful structures. However, we can see agency as being offered as an individual responsibility and choice. Therefore, 'agency' is structured by neoliberal discourses of individualism and responsibility. More importantly these structures work to conceal other societal structures, such as the role of social class, which work to remove responsibility from the state and act to exclude some people and privilege others. As Harris (2004) suggests, 'apparent opportunities for self-invention and individual effort exist within circumstances that remain highly constrained for the majority of people' (5). The girls' statements, therefore, show how agency is negotiated through structures, and how structures act through individual agency.

Playing with the truth – dollmaker pleasures

In an attempt to engage girls in a discussion about some of the discourses concerning media and body dissatisfaction, I asked more directly if they felt that playing with fashion webpages or fashion dolls or reading teen magazines affects how they feel about themselves. The girls had a variety of responses to this question, all centring on factors which affect the way media are read.

The girls in the current study argued that they do not compare themselves to images on dollmaker sites ('but they're cartoons' explained Dalia) or to plastic dolls such as Barbie which are clearly not real. The girls were suggesting that

modality, that is, the truth claims made by a text, affect how a text is read. As Dalia described, 'like if you look at Bratz they've got a really small body and like some big heads on it'. The girls seemed perplexed that adults would consider play with disproportionate plastic breasts as affecting them: one girl exclaimed, 'my boobs are normal!' The girls' reflection on dolls' modality supports Driscoll's ideas about 'multiplicity of Barbie': '[Barbie] is woman/not-woman and human/not-human, a game that can seem to denaturalize gender despite the anxieties of interested parties' (Driscoll, 2002:97). The girls did not think adults would consider play with fashion dolls or dollmaker websites as risky and instead would see it as they do 'it's only a game', although one group considered the possibility of becoming overly concerned with clothes, putting a financial strain on their family. Buckingham (1993) describes how the social context of children's talk about media determines the kinds of statements they make, and in particular he relates how girls take an oppositional stance to a particular television programme due in part to the presence of boys in the group but also the interviewer. Similarly, the girls in my interviews are taking an oppositional stance to adult anxieties about certain types of media, whilst at the same time adding nuance their argument in response to the formal situation of being interviewed by a university researcher.

With dollmaker and doll play, the girls indicate that the weak modality of the resources with which they are playing minimises the effects on, for example,

body image. However, one group of girls indicated that body dissatisfaction might occur when looking at teen magazines:

VALERIE: It's mostly when you start seeing idols or celebrities in particular that you want to turn yourself like that

GRACE: Ya you wanna be like them

...

VALERIE: Unless they see an actual body they won't try and make themselves like them

Resources with strong modality, therefore, are seen to have greater effect than those with weak modality. We can also see the girls' statements as evidence of the shift away from a perceived need for an imposed code of conduct, media regulation in this case, and toward an approach whereby individuals are responsible for making choices and shaping their lives (Rose, 1999). As self-reflexive individuals, the girls are able to analyse when media might have an effect on them, as demonstrated in their statements here. In neoliberal terms, one could conclude that these girls are demonstrating their ability to take responsibility and make ethical choices. However, we may also want to look at how, as Rose (1999) describes, 'Consumption requires each individual to choose from among a variety of products in response to a repertoire of wants that may be shaped and legitimated by advertising and promotion but must be experienced and justified as personal desires' (231). This raises questions about

how girls talk about the pleasures they gain from their consumption of fashion dolls.

It is clear from the girls' interactions with dollmaker that part of the appeal is a pleasure in playing with fashion in a social context: they construct outfits together, they show each other their finished outfits, they try on outrageous outfits and 'have a laugh'. Dalia describes the pleasure in this play: 'Like, you can make them weird or make them really nice like they're going to a party'. This play is partly about fantasising about their future bodies. Numeyra said, 'I just like the hairstyles, and I just go, "Oh, I wish I had long hair," or something'. When I asked the girls if dressing up on dollmaker would make you then go and want to wear that sort of outfit, Jade said, 'No, you would just think oh what would I look like if I wore that'. These fantasy texts are similar to the girl pin-ups in teenage girl magazines. McRobbie argues that fantasy materials offer spaces for girls to move away from their position as children and towards the exciting and new position of adolescents (1991:184). Similarly, Walkerdine (1997) looks at girls' fantasies as spaces in which girls play with and insert themselves into various discursive practices, and therefore fantasies 'become discursive and material in the social world' (p.188). In one sense this research supports the observation from the current study, that dollmaker images offer spaces for play and fantasy. However, it is also important to consider Rose's (1999) suggestion that the pleasure is shaped by consumer structures. Numeyra's desire to have long hair is not necessarily about the inherent properties of long hair, but about the social

construction of long hair, which is reflected and produced in advertisements, for example. Similarly, statements by the girls about modality provide a cautionary note to a celebratory stance in which 'play' with images is seen as unproblematic. Although we may want to argue that girls are not affected by media images in a simplistic way, we will also want to avoid falling into the trap of saying they are not affected at all.

Dressing for success – self-esteem, confidence and dress

According to the responses the girls gave in the interviews, the role of parents is a key factor in girls' self image and attitude toward dress. Several of the girls adopted a moral high ground stance and criticised mothers who did not care how their children dressed, indicating that particular types of dress are inappropriate for certain ages.

JADE: There's some little girl who goes to some primary school I always see her and her mum's always putting her in these big high boots and short skirts and I'm like the girl's no more than six

MACKENZIE: You can't make them be your twin because if they think they're dressing for you

As implied in this excerpt, the girls argue that of the role of a good mother is to ensure that children dress and do not dress in particular ways. Similar to the conversation about eating disorders, this kind of conversation amongst girl friends can be seen as one way in which normative forms of femininity are being

defined and reinforced (Kehily et al, 2002). Here discourses concerning childhood are being referred to, but more specifically, the girls are using discourses which regulate childhood. A girl of 'no more than six' is defined above as inappropriately dressed. This can also be seen as part of the surveillance work of late modernity. The girls are scrutinising other people, blaming individuals ('*you* can't make them be *your* twin') for making poor choices.

Correct parenting is not only about how children are allowed to dress, it is also the key to how girls feel about their appearance, as Mackenzie describes:

It's probably about the way [parents] talk to you they could say oh, they should just sit you down and say "oh no matter what people say I think you're ok and there's nothing wrong with you," they shouldn't just say "oh don't be silly you're not ugly"

Similar to the discussion about modality, the girls are indicating that effects of 'the tyranny of slenderness' (Chernin, 1994) are determined by a range of factors, and the way parents talk to children is a key factor. In this case, the girls are arguing that there are specific ways parents should talk to children, and these ways of talking have an impact on self-confidence. Although the girls refer to 'parents' at some points and specify 'mothers' at other points, it is striking that they use discourse which Walkerdine and Lucy (1989) assert serves to regulate mothers – assigning guilt to mothers who fail to raise confident daughters.

Walkerdine and Lucey describe how, particularly through talk, mothers are assigned a pedagogical role which psychologists, and more recently, the general public, insist is crucial to their child's development. As in the above excerpt, the girls in the current study have used this discourse to assert that parents hold the key to their child's confidence.

Closely connected with confidence is a feeling of comfort, which was mentioned by many of the girls and seems to refer not only to a physical state but also an emotional feeling, as Giovanna indicates: 'Because if you just copy someone else and don't feel comfortable, you're not really yourself'. Again the girls are emphasising the importance of feeling confident. This is echoed in a study on women's clothing choices, in which confidence is connected not only with choice of clothes but also with multi-faceted feelings of comfort (Gillen, 2003). When I asked the girls in the current study what was in their wardrobes at home and what clothes they would like to buy in the shops, several of the girls specifically mentioned being 'embarrassed' by seeing thongs at the front of a shop, feeling that 'wearing skirts that are too short...look stupid', or indicating that provocative styles 'are not for me'. The girls would not feel comfortable in thongs and short skirts, due in part to the discursive practices which position them as needing to express individuality as well as innocence, but also due to the scrutiny and surveillance which comes with self-reflexivity. Therefore, although dressing comfortably implies a kind of free choice, we can see how that choice is limited through their position as citizen consumers, as I will discuss below.

Whereas Mackenzie in the excerpt above connects self-esteem with parenting, Ashley and Giovanna take the argument a step further and connect confidence with eating disorders and dress, and individuality with the ability to resist peer pressures.

GIOVANNA: Well, for me, to me I look at it...if you have good self-esteem then you shouldn't be worried. But then if you=

ASHLEY: =If you don't, if you're not really happy with yourself, then you'll be one of those people who will force themselves to lose weight.

GIOVANNA: But then again, um, that thing brings the person out of you. Because what you wear tells a lot about you, that you feel comfortable about yourself or if you, um, just want to fit in in a group, or...yeah.

These statements echo findings from Currie's (1999) study in which girls described how little influence magazine fashion had on their choice of what to wear, and instead how they strived for a look which was both an expression of individualism as well as a sign of their belonging to dominant peer cultures. An interesting element in Ashley and Giovanna's excerpt above is the contradiction between expressing individuality and maintaining belonging in a group.

According to Giovanna, if you feel confident, then you are able to resist 'just want[ing] to fit in in a group'. All the groups of girls said that developing an individual style was important, and they also saw it as a benefit of creating

fashion designs and playing on dollmaker websites. Part of the fun of playing with dollmaker is 'to create your own image' and 'to express what kind of clothes you like'. The girls are drawing on a particular discourse in which development of personal style is encouraged, for example, teen magazines suggesting personalising wardrobes by searching in second-hand clothing shops (McRobbie, 1991). Although these girls use individuality as an argument to display their independence (from parents, crowds or manipulative media), when I asked them where they would buy clothes if I gave them £100, every girl listed the same sports shop. The girls seemed comfortable with these apparent contradictions - on the one hand having an individual style, and on the other hand wearing very similar clothes from the same store. They argued that individual style can be expressed through sports clothes, for example; and different trainers (sport shoes) in particular are indicative of the 'tribe' to which one belongs (Sahlins, 1976). This is reminiscent of analyses of youth subcultures which show how material objects are used by young people as markers of identity, defining their specific social groups, and distinguishing class, race and gender as well as age (Hebdige, 1979; Lury, 1996). And, as Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1995) describe, there is a tension around authenticity, between expression of individuality and expression of belonging to a particular subculture.

The discourses of autonomy and individualism are important to recognise here, particularly in the way they conflict with the need to be part of a group and the ways in which choices are controlled. The girls in the current study are reflecting

'girl power' discourses – the power to buy what they like and express their identity through consumerism. Harris (2004) describes how consumerism is part of the way citizenship is enacted in late modernity. According to Harris, citizenship is also defined through self-discipline, high self-esteem and confidence – all characteristics which the girls in my study are drawing on in their production of the self-reflexive subject, as is apparent in the previous interview excerpts. Furthermore, we may want to look at how discourses of choice, which offer a space for pleasurable consumption, serve to regulate ideas about girls who are seen to navigate choices successfully, as responsible citizen consumers, and those who are seen to lack the discipline to make good choices (Harris, 2004).

Conclusion

The data described in this article shows that girls, as in McRobbie's earlier suggestions (1991), are familiar with 'a range of narrative codes against which stories and fictions can be measured for their success or failure' (143). The girls are rejecting particular narrative codes and also buying into others: they argue that they are not susceptible to media images of skinny women or sexy fashion, they can play with media images of skinny or curvaceous women without feeling they have to look like those women, they are confident and can resist societal and peer pressure regarding choices of clothing and feelings about their bodies. On the one hand, we can see these arguments as expressions of empowerment and resistance to powerful consumer cultures. However, the girls are not just

free agents, there are particular structures that are shaping their arguments. The girls draw on discourses around individuality, self-confidence and proper parenting to argue that they make conscious decisions about what to wear and to demonstrate that they have healthy attitudes about their bodies. The girls' arguments demonstrate their agency, but neoliberal discourses frame their arguments and construct positions which demand autonomous, rational and unitary selves (Walkerdine, 2004). By looking at both these arguments – girls as active agents and girls as subjects of neoliberal discourses – we begin to see how structure and agency work through each other to create complex and contradictory positions which girls are navigating.

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