

More than “Selfies and Starbucks”:
A Feminist Exploration of Adolescent Girls’ Photographic Nexuses

by

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Master of Arts, University of Victoria, 2011

Bachelor of Education, Lakehead University, 1998

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A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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Department of Curriculum and Instruction

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University of Victoria

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Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

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Incredibly harmful hegemonic norms are being disseminated through postfeminist media and female adolescents are being targeted and shaped by them in alarming ways. Given this current cultural climate, it is timely and critical to identify how new literacies, popular media, and institutional sexism are impacting young women's lives, their understanding of the world, and of themselves. In this arts-based study the author investigated teen girls' photographs and accompanying stories to determine which nexuses exist between the participants, their photographs, and their life experiences in order to discover in what ways their photography revealed elements of their identities. Critical feminist theory and visual narrative inquiry informed this SSHRC funded research in which photo elicitation was conducted with 8 teen girls over a period of 6 months. Findings revealed that within the main nexuses of appearance, media, and identity the themes of fetishization, post-feminism influences, and control were complexly interwoven. By exploring the girls' photographs and investigating the stories and interpretations associated with them, it was possible to develop insight into how youth were using visual media to document and understand their life experiences and

create their identities. Ongoing conversation with the participants about their images provided an opportunity for them to consider how their photographic images represented (or misrepresented) their identities. This feminist research allowed for experimentation, reflection, and generative knowledge to occur for the participants. It invites the reader into the blurred boundary between public space, cultural norms and societal expectations, and the private worlds, personal ideas and identities in which adolescent girls live as they mature into young adults.

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There are some things you can't share without ending up liking each other, and knocking out a twelve-foot mountain troll is one of them.

J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*

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Dedication

Helen,

Your collaboration, support, patience, and above all, love, have helped us both prevail during this degree, and in life!

You continue to provide me with courage and strength.

This dissertation is dedicated to you.

Chapter 1: Introduction

How did I learn how to be a girl?



Figure 1. The researcher at age 12, entering adolescence

I was placed a grade ahead in school so I spent time with many girls a year older than me -- they became my teachers about girlhood. By grade 6 there was a particular group of girls with whom I was friendly, although I am not sure I quite fit into their close circle of friends. Their behaviour was at times something I envied and at other times something I shrank from. Wearing make-up and carrying "the right kind of purse" (black leather, tassels, slung on one forearm) made them seem so sophisticated and grown up. I begged for the same kind of purse and to be allowed to wear make up. Permission denied. My mother told me that nice girls didn't wear make-up at my age. My red imitation leather (ok, it was pretty plastic looking) purse didn't accompany me to school, lest the cool kids see it and make fun of me. They taught me how I wanted to look, even if I wasn't able to mimic their appearance.

The older girls' behaviour around boys also reflected a year's more maturity that I had. They flirted with the boys in the grade ahead of us. They wore off the shoulder shirts to show off their bra straps. My bra hadn't even been purchased yet. They even spent time at recess and after school kissing those boys. I was quite afraid of this kind of interaction. I was still happy to play make believe games with the neighbourhood kids

once in a while. I also didn't know why they would want to kiss those boys, as those boys seemed kind of, well yucky.

At home I learned about being a girl from books and television and at school I learned about being a girl from my peers. This continued until I was in high school and somewhere along the way I found myself feeling strong in my belief that I could act, say, wear, and think whatever I wanted, even if it was going against the grain. However, I still craved attention from the boys in our circle of friends. I still tried to wear a lot of the common fashions for the time. I still behaved very shyly when it came to matters of the heart -- all fairly traditional "girl" performances.

BUT -- I was not always so traditional. I shaved part of my head. I wore strange earring combinations and odd colours and styles of clothing. I expressed my opinion about nearly everything, rather than hanging back to see what others said first. Did these behaviours make me less of a girl? Did they make me a different kind of girl? Was that even possible? Was I allowed to be a different kind of girl? Who was in control of my girl-ness? I came to discover I was.

So where did my girl training go wrong? I read the books. I watched the other girls and modeled their behaviour. I saw movies about teenagers and tried to imitate them. I even chose to not be "me" at times, to see if that got me the desired results but really, I didn't know what those results were. I wasn't sure of my target so I didn't know if I had reached it. *Maybe my girl training didn't go wrong at all.* Maybe "my girl-ness" was different because each girl is taught and learns in different ways.

Excerpt from: *Perfectly Imperfect: A métissage of girlhood, motherhood, and personhood in academia* (Bonsor, Starr, & Fleming, 2012)

Background of Problem

Initially when I wrote this story I believed that much of my "girl training" (as I labeled it) came from my peers, however after completing this research I have come to realize that so much of what I thought my peers were teaching me actually was learned by them from media's messages of society's norms for young women, and my peers were simply following along being who they thought they were supposed to be.

Mainstream culture, found in messages in school as well as out-of-school contexts, "instructs" girls on the "approved" ways to become women. Pipher

(1994) referred to a "girl-poisoning culture" (p. 20) and demonstrated that girls seem to lose themselves in adolescence, and they know it. Sanford, 2005, p. 305.

We were all trapped within a box that we did not realize existed, trying to become just like the constructed and contrived feminine idols presented to us by hegemonic, consumeristic media-based institutions. As such, it was not easy being an adolescent girl in the 1990's and I assert that being an adolescent girl today is even harder, given the onslaught of visual media over the past decade and the ease of access to the myriad digital devices and texts vying for our attention. Scholars have been documenting the harmful ways in which media messages have negatively influenced young women for the past three decades and continue to do so (For example, Jean Kilbourne's *Killing Us Softly* video series; and Conley & Ramsey's (2011) critique and affirmation of many of Kilbourne's assertions). Wohlwend & Medina (2012) echo Sanford's (2005) claim that media "instruct girls on the approved ways to become women" by suggesting that popular media are "omnipresent pedagogies that powerfully shape who we can be and how we can act within classrooms and communities" (p. 545).

My Feminist Beginnings and Research Motivation

When I think about my own high school experiences in relation to my developing feminist identity I recall numerous times when I had to stand up for myself or when I was put down because of my gender. For instance, the older boys in the school used to walk down our very crowded hallways and grab the girls' breasts as we made our way through the masses. There were so many people going by it was nearly impossible to figure out just who had touched you. I never heard about any girls walking around grabbing at the boys' chests or other body parts. This angered me and there were days where I spent

every class change with my books clasped to my front to protect myself. Despite the fact that we raised the issue with teachers in the school, the groping continued.

The discourse around “girls can be anything they want to be” was prevalent among my friends and teachers when I was in high school, although the words felt empty and unsupported. Thinking about it now, the fact that the discussion had to be held at all was telling -- the movement of women into all aspects of professional life was still occurring. The news contained stories about women being stopped by the glass ceiling. Nearly all political figures were men. The evidence of “women can do anything” was hard for me to find.

In Grade Nine Phys. Ed our classes were segregated. The boys had a male teacher and the girls had a female teacher. I still remember being frustrated that we had to learn a dance routine to “Montego Bay” while the boys’ class played soccer, wrestled and did other seemingly more active and fun things on the other side of the gym wall. The boys did not have to learn to dance. They did however peek through the door in the retractable wall that separated us from them. They laughed and pointed at our class, mocking our routine and movements. I am pretty sure that I did not want to be wrestling with the boys instead of dancing, or with the girls, for that matter, as I was only about 85 pounds soaking wet. What troubled me was that the boys were not dancing because *they didn’t want to* -- I remember this distinctly. I had asked my teacher why the girls had to dance since I was not very good at learning routines and thought another activity would have been preferable. The answer was that boys don’t like dancing, they misbehave and it’s too hard to get them to do it, so they do other things. At the time it did not occur to me that there probably would have been a few boys in my class who would have very much liked to learn a dance routine instead of wrestling or playing soccer.

Life in high school was socially centered and gender divided. The Phys. Ed. classes were just one example of this. Insults between students were often racist comments (related to which country you or your parents were assumed to be from, i.e. “Why don’t you go back to ...”, or “You must be stupid because you’re from country X”), gender-based, or homophobic. Girls were insulted because of their appearance or how sexually promiscuous they were said to be and the boys were made fun of if they were not macho or manly enough. Students knew that the teachers did not tolerate racist comments so they tended to occur when out of teachers’ range of hearing. Gender-based insults were often ignored or not treated with the same seriousness as a racist slur.

I always felt proud of being a girl and never backed down from a challenge related to my gender. I was not afraid to debate the boys in English class, compare my marks to theirs on a science assignment, or run sprints against the boys in Phys. Ed. This was not necessarily true for my peers as I recall a discussion about whether one should pretend to be dumb so a guy will like you. My response was to “Be yourself and if he doesn’t like you for that, he’s not worth it.” That we talked about methods and manipulations of how to get the attention of a boy showed the power that images and expectations of what girls *should be like* had over us. Power in high school shifted between the girls and the boys depending on the situation. Powerful male students often gained power through their performance on the football or basketball teams while powerful females were rewarded for their popularity and their appearance. A female principal was assumed to be a bitch because that’s how women in positions of power were often classified by society. A male teacher would either be really strict or more likely, a buddy/pal or coach figure, who was more of a friend to the students than an authority.

My girl-identity was an important part of who I was as an adolescent. In 1989, when the tragic murder of women at Ecole Polytechnique in Montreal occurred because a man was “fighting feminism” I was strongly affected. I struggled to believe that one could be murdered simply for being a woman. My naivety stemmed perhaps from growing up in a small city in Northern Ontario where I was sheltered from much of the violence women faced in other parts of the world, where abuse and murder were far more common. Was sexism (in the criminal’s mind, in the institution, and in society) so strong that women studying subjects that were traditionally seen as men’s areas of work could trigger such a violent reaction? Apparently it was.

My Preparation for Research

Before this research began, I observed adolescent students in a grade 11 photography class at a large high school in an urban centre about a dozen times in a three month period. I wanted some background knowledge and/or context about how adolescent girls were engaging with photography, and possibly with feminism, in order to help me shape my research question and plans. The photography class was approximately half female and half male students. They were enrolled by choice in order to gain an elective credit. While getting to know the students and their photographic practices I noticed equality and equity issues seemed to be popular areas of engagement for students at this high school, like encouraging multiculturalism, highlighting socio-economic differences, building awareness of queer issues, pledging support for anti-bullying initiatives, and promoting community involvement. Fundraising and school-spirit events related to all these issues were held over the course of the term during which I visited. Missing from the advertising posters, announcements, and discussions I overheard related

to these events were explicit references to feminism, although each of these topics is related to feminism in various ways. This led me to wonder how my own high school memories of peers' sexist and misogynistic behaviour compared to these adolescent students' experiences. Could it be that feminism was so closely connected to other equity and equality issues for these adolescents that it was difficult to isolate or was it missing entirely? Was its absence an oversight or purposefully excluded?

Photography 11

I got to know Marcie while she and another student helped me make my first prints in the darkroom. Because we were the only ones making prints, we worked at our own pace -- some time was spent making the prints and some time was spent talking. As we chatted in the dark space, the girls gave me a lesson on how to create a print from a negative in between sharing their stories about the photographs they had made. I was happy to be learning from these students. Having never worked in a darkroom before I was terrified at first that my print would be overexposed and turn black. I realized quickly that should things not work out, I could adjust my exposure time and try again. (A metaphor perhaps for the subtle questioning I was doing to find out about the girls' photographic experiences -- if my questions did not garner the answers I was looking for, I had the opportunity to try again.) I was also really excited to "go back to the basics" of photography where digital technology could not be depended upon to create "perfect" electronic representations of what I had seen through the viewfinder. This time the outcome of the photograph was more about my manipulation of the light on the paper and less about the camera's sensor. There was something quite humbling about actually MAKING a photograph -- one that took careful calculation, time and a little bit of luck

that no extraneous light had snuck in during the exposure. Marcie commented that she was excited about me being excited to make my first prints. It made her happy, she said. This seemed to be the icebreaker I was hoping for because she then started asking about my upcoming research and wanted to know what my plans were. I explained my research project, its importance, and my enthusiasm for it hoping that her initial interest would last until I was able to recruit participants later that autumn.

A few days later, I was fortunate to get to work with Marcie again. She and another student accompanied me out into the school's courtyard for some nature photography for their next assignment. As I photographed tulips and dandelions, Marcie talked about how she loved photography and shared her ideas for the class assignment: Alpha-challenge (Select five consecutive letters of the alphabet and take five photographs -- each with the subject starting with one of the letters -- extra marks if they're on a theme). Marcie's theme was water. She was looking forward to going to Dallas Road to shoot with two friends as models. They had agreed to letting Marcie have "free reign" so Marcie was getting ideas about what she planned to do with them. She already had one photograph for her series; "*Umbrella*" which showed a young couple holding hands, walking away from the camera, holding an umbrella. The male was barefoot. Marcie seemed pleased with this photograph as she asked for her camera back from the student who had borrowed it to show me. Later she commented that she had posted "*Umbrella*" to her father's Facebook album and his friends were commenting on it positively. The enthusiasm in her voice and the smile on her face demonstrated to me that she felt proud of herself. Again she commented that she loved photography and from this I believe she meant the process of staging her own photographs, as well as making the finished products in the darkroom. I noted Marcie's experiences with photography seemed to defy

the media's stereotype that teenagers only use cameras for selfies, provided her with a sense of accomplishment and offered her a site of artistic expression.

Purpose

My conversations with Marcie, and a few of her classmates, confirmed for me that these adolescent girls were using cameras, practicing photography in various ways, and thinking about the photographs they made far beyond just pushing the shutter and seeing them flash on the camera's LCD screen for three seconds. Along with selfies (that are often made without much planning or artistic forethought), these girls were creating artful, thoughtful, and purposeful photographs.

The more time I spent at the high school in the Photography 11 class, the more questions I had relating to adolescent girls' visual literacy activities: What was their photographic practice? What was the thinking behind/before and beyond the photographs they made? What did they want their photographs to mean? To communicate? To whom? What implicit/hegemonic messages were contained within their photographs? Were they aware of the hidden-in-plain-sight meanings? Could their photographs portray their own understandings about feminism? Investigating these kinds of questions has provided insight into the ways that adolescent girls are representing their lives, their understandings about society and culture, and to what degree they engage in critical thinking/literacy related to the photographs they create and are faced with.

Statement of Problem

It has been shown that how women are portrayed in media is damaging; Conley & Ramsey (2011) present an overview of many studies that expose the negative effects on

women's self-esteem and body image (p. 469). The current media-saturated existence in which many young women live is coupled with technological advances happening so quickly that it is nearly impossible to know how they are engaging and what effects their engagement might have on their identity formation, body image, self-esteem, and life experience. Additionally, post-feminist messages embedded within media and other public institutions provide further cause for alarm as stated by Wohlwend and Medina (2012) "Postfeminism circulates a vision of perpetual self-improvement that focuses attention on beauty ideals" (p. 546) who also draw attention to McRobbie's (2009) declaration: postfeminism asserts norms that "re-secure the terms of submission of white femininity to white masculine domination, while simultaneously resurrecting racial divisions by undoing any promise of multiculturalism through the exclusion of non-white femininities from this rigid repertoire of selfstyling" (p. 70). Given this current cultural climate, it is timely and critical to identify how new literacies, popular media, and institutional sexism are impacting young women's lives, their understanding of the world, and of themselves.

I am interested in investigating the experiences of adolescent girls and their photography because I want to know if adolescent girls today also feel a sense of feminism or girl-ness that is an important part of their identity, perhaps like I did when I was younger or perhaps in a different way. Is power or a lack of it in adolescent girls' lives connected to their gender and/or their identity development? Sexism, gender stereotypes, and inequity are often engrained in institutional traditions and societal norms -- getting attention only when stark examples are brought to light. Photography can allow for sexism, inequality, and gender performance to be made visible and more easily examined, as a photograph captures a moment that can be revisited repeatedly.

Photography can also help identity values and beliefs held by the photographer, the viewer, and it can reflect that which is valuable to society too.

Research Question

Nexus: noun – a connection or series of connections linking two or more things; a connected group or series; a central or focal point (“Nexus”, Oxford Online Dictionary, 2016); the central or most important point or place; something that communicates relationships between two or more things. (“Nexus”, New Oxford American Dictionary, n.d.)

The photograph can act as a nexus for an adolescent girl, making implicit and explicit connections between her understanding of her life experiences and that of society around her; between her identity and how she expresses it; between texts she uses and texts she creates. A photograph can be a stimulus to (potentially critical) thoughts or the answers to them. “Photography, like other forms of artistic expression integrates mind, body, heart and spirit by surfacing knowledge from the unconscious that can contribute to transformative learning (Lawrence, 2008)” (Lipson Lawrence, & Cranton, 2009, p. 317). With this in mind, my main research question is:

What are adolescent girls’ photographic nexuses?

- How do these photographic nexuses reflect feminism in the lives of adolescent girls?
- What experiences do they choose to photograph?
- Which meanings are intended in their photographs? Which meanings are they unaware of?
- How do their photographs help them make sense of their lives and to some extent reflect their identities of context and/or selves?

- What can we learn about adolescent girls' critical literacies towards photographs – their own and others?

These questions guided my research into feminism and how adolescent girls communicated using photographs, how they understood their own photographs and how they engaged critically with visual texts.

Significance of Study

This research provides significant understandings as to how patriarchal, hegemonic norms from society are perpetuated and internalized by young women who are at a formative period in their lives and if/how they challenge these ideas. “At all times, they [adolescents] are implicitly and sometimes explicitly measured against the criteria of white, male, middle class adulthood in a way that suggests a truth element -- one that supersedes contexts of history” (Stevens, Hunter, Pendergast, Carrington, Bahr, Kapitzke & Mitchell, 2007, p. 108). Over the course of this research the adolescent girl participants experimented with identities and gained life experience and during this time they were influenced by texts, many of them visual, made by themselves and other people. This research places an emphasis on *knowing* that is beyond the written word and *knowing* that is expressed through a visual medium -- through photographic techniques, content and context, and artistic and personal decisions. Knowing within photography invites the photographer to discover multiple meanings, through the embodied events (Pink, 2009) of making and viewing a photograph. Photographs also offer a way of knowing that could be described as holistic -- presenting an “all-at-onceness” (Eisner, 1995) of an event that allows meaning to be made both immediately and upon reflection over time. Deciphering and decoding images and then connecting them to prior knowledge creates the

opportunity for new knowledge to be formed for the photographer and audience. This feminist research allows for experimentation, reflection, and generative knowledge to occur for the participants. It is about the blurred boundaries between public space, cultural norms and societal expectations, and the private worlds, personal ideas and identities that adolescent girls live in as they mature into young adults.

Overview and Organization of Dissertation

This research is a qualitative, arts-based investigation of adolescent girls' photographic practices. It centres on how their photographs and stories reveal aspects of their identities, their values and beliefs, and their life experiences. Using photo elicitation (Harper, 2002) to engage with 8 adolescent girls from a high school in a mid-sized city in British Columbia, I obtained 222 photographs that they self-selected. I adopted a critical feminist perspective during the open-ended interviews, to allow for a collaborative meaning-making process between the participants and myself to occur, and also during the analysis of the photographs and interviews.

This dissertation is organized into 9 chapters.

Chapter One: This chapter is an introduction to the research, providing information about the problem, defining the research question, and outlining the paper. Personal narratives that help explain how this research topic emerged are included, in line with feminist theorizing of including the researcher within the research.

Chapter Two: This chapter presents the pertinent literature related to the topics of the research: adolescents, photography, feminism and postfeminism. It begins by providing an overview of 21st Century adolescents and their technological literacies. Vital to the findings and analysis is theory related to photography and meaning making and

how viewers come to understand images. Lastly, postfeminism -- the central element stemming from the analysis -- is defined and discussed.

Chapter Three: In this chapter I explain the research design, the participants, data, and analysis. The methodological frameworks informing the research -- critical feminism, photo elicitation, and visual narrative inquiry -- are discussed. The positionality of the researcher is described next in which I acknowledge my place a project that involves young women self-selecting their photography and narratives.

Chapters Four to Chapter Seven: These are the findings and initial analysis chapters. Chapters Four and Eight are the introduction and summary respectively. Chapters Five, Six, and Seven present an in-depth look at the three main nexuses that arose from the data: Social Media, Appearance, and Identity. These chapters include many photographs and stories from the girls' interviews as well as my comments as initial analysis.

Chapter Eight: This chapter provides a further analysis and discussion of the themes arising from the data and the ways in which the nexuses are interwoven. Included in this chapter are examples from current media sources that exemplify concerns arising about the ways in which young women are being educated to be women by often damaging societal influences.

Chapter Nine: In this concluding chapter I present my reflections on the project as well as its implications and potential for future research. I also provide recommendations for those adults who have the opportunity to know adolescent girls and their photography.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide context in which the findings and discussion of the study can be understood. I begin by describing how adolescence is a period of self-investigation and identity formation. The influence of new literacies and technologies on both adolescents' identity formation and their school-related activities demonstrates the overlap between how they are encouraged to engage in 21st Century learning strategies that mimic their own digital habits outside of school.

Vital to the reading of visual data in this study is an understanding of key elements of photographic theory. I present theoretical concepts outlining ways in which meaning can be made related to photographs, as well as offering how a critical view can be adopted. In addition I suggest how the participants' roles as photographers, viewers, and subjects of photography influences the meanings of the photographs that are included.

Fundamental to my entire research experience is the ethos of feminism, and its ugly step-sister, post-feminism. This section defines feminism as well as how it connects to post-feminism. Post-feminism is also defined and introduced as an underlying influence impacting the participants' lives, photography, and societal norms. Further discussion of post-feminism is revisited in Chapter 9.

Lastly, a theoretical grounding of the term nexus is included to demonstrate how I have defined it to function as both a theoretical framework for the research and as a structure for my analysis, organization and understanding.

Adolescence: A Period of Self and Identity Formation

“Adolescence is the period where the ‘self’ is found and established for life,” (Stevens et al., 2007, p. 101). Self refers to a core set of beliefs about who one is and how one behaves. These beliefs infiltrate through the multiple identities that people perform depending on the context in which they find themselves. “Many identity researchers (e.g. Brinthaupt and Lipka, 2002; Harter, 1999; Hogg et al., 1995) regard the self and identity as two different, yet related constructs. They assume that while individuals have only one self, they have many different identities” (Valkenburg, Schouten, & Peter, 2005, p. 384).

Identities, for the purpose of this research, can be defined by embracing a feminist ethos that emphasizes a personal, embodied lived-experience along with the external influences upon one’s life. Thomas (2007), explains that

Identity is always about the body, and the bodily states and desires of *being* (the historical and natural aspects of the body), *becoming* (aging through the natural forces of temporality, more knowledgeable and wise as we learn and experience the world, and growing with the playing out and accomplishment of fantasies and ideals we aspire to), *belonging* (our set of beliefs and ideologies, and the people and groups we align ourselves with), and *behaving* (entering into the discourses associated with the roles we adopt across the social spheres which we inhabit). (p.8)

Identities can be understood as sites of knowing not only through meanings one has made about oneself by thinking about them, but also through one’s physical experiences -- what has happened in one’s life. Because each person’s experiences build on their prior knowledge, cultural influences, and their values and beliefs, different identities of self are performed for different reasons.

In asking what is most crucial to identity, one can offer, from liberal humanist standpoints, that it is the experience of the individual, the experience of the individual as seen in the context of social and cultural structures, the lived experience of the subject. (Stevens et al., 2007, p. 120)

As Stevens et al. (2007) state, identity comes from not just experiences, but the cultural influences with which one lives. Other identity scholars share the concept that identity is an effect of particular cultural and social standards too. “Identity represents the aspect of the self that is accessible and salient in a particular context and that interacts with the environment” (Finkenauer, Engels, Meeus, & Oosterwegel, 2002, p. 2 as cited in Valkenburg, 2005, p. 384). Understanding identity using Finkenauer et al.’s (2002) ideas helps one make sense of the components of *self* -- a variety of ways of being that are selectively executed depending on the position in which one is found.

For adolescents, identity formation is an ongoing process that is influenced by those with whom one spends time and also the “cultural situations that surround that individual” (Rudd, 2012, p. 683). Valkenburg (2005) suggests that for adolescents the cultural situations include interactions with “family, peer group and school” (p. 384). So as adolescents perform aspects of “situated selves” (Gee, 1997, p. xvi), part of their maturity process is to “transform these initially compartmentalized identities into an integrated self (Josselson, 1994; Marcia, 1993)” (Valkenburg, 2005, p. 384). These explanations help us to recognize identities as sharing the same quality as photographs -- both are **indexical** -- understood because of their context, often shifting depending on the circumstances in which they are being considered, and influenced by societal and/or cultural conditions. By studying the photographs that adolescent girls make, we can begin to reveal aspects of their identities and how they are influenced by the social structures in

which they live and their responses to them.

Hagood's (2004) study of adolescent girls' text use and popular culture's influences on their identities highlights the ways in which the participants embraced certain identities in certain situations/contexts, while abandoning the same identities in other contexts (e.g. being Catholic, Mexican, and liking pop music). She states that the participants with whom she worked use texts to try and "create active constructions of naturally occurring contradictions of self" (p. 159). These "naturally occurring contradictions" are expressed through identity behaviours as adolescents experiment and explore the ways in which they are (be)coming to know who they are as maturing young adults. "Young people now have independent entry into social and cultural life (through consumerism, fashion, leisure and so on) – and now as such are confronted with many of the same choices as adults" (Valentine, 2000, p. 265). Written in 2000, this statement still holds true today and perhaps even more so with the onslaught of image-focused digital technologies and online software that provide even more ways in which many adolescents can independently not just "enter" but contribute and shape their "social and cultural life". "The influence of visual culture on adolescents has become pervasive in recent decades, particularly as a result of changing visual technologies" (Freedman, 2006, p. 26). The ease of access to cameras and "sites of display" (Jones, 2009) in which young people can present photographs of themselves and their lives offers "an opportunity to show rather than 'tell' aspects of their identity that might have otherwise remained hidden" (Croghan, Griffin, Hunter, & Phoenix, 2008, p. 346). What is significant to these acts of "showing" is that possible aspects of identity are unintentionally shared, and that adolescents are potentially unaware of this possibility. The production and consumption of multimodal texts as a way to learn about and perform identity which Hagood's (2004) study

highlights, and the notion that adolescents are making adult choices (with and without guidance) (Valentine, 2000) suggests that the complex identity formation process for adolescent in the 21st century is far different than that of previous decades. “Recently scholars have argued that life in the 21st century will require the orientation and skills to repeatedly explore and reconstruct identity in order to cope with continuous change and uncertainty (Flum & Kaplan, 2006)” (Kaplan & Flum, 2012, p. 172). The more we know about how adolescents are approaching and pursuing this process, the better informed adults can be when helping youth to navigate their identities and self development.

21st Century Adolescents

Thinking back to the high school photography class where I spent time with Marcie, I recall nearly all of the students arriving, greeting their fellow classmates and then reaching, seemingly automatically, for their smart phones, a 21st Century phenomenon. Although somewhat stereotypical in nature, the idea that adolescents are constantly online or attached to their digital devices seemed a fairly accurate way to describe Marcie’s classmates. Some glanced for only seconds looking at notifications and alerts while others scrolled through pages on Facebook or other social networking sites, like Twitter and Tumblr. The students’ access to digital technology extended beyond their phones to the dozen computers that lined the classroom walls and the data projector their teacher used to show web content on the big screen. These tools provided information through multimodal texts including photographs, hyperlinks, webpages, sound bites, and more.

In 21st Century Learning, students use educational technologies to apply knowledge to new situations, analyze information, collaborate, solve problems, and make decisions. Utilizing emerging technologies to provide expanded learning

opportunities is critical to the success of future generations. Improved options and choice for students will help improve student completion and achievement.

(Ministry of Education, British Columbia, 2015

https://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/dist_learning/21century_learning.htm)

The students in this class were invited *and* expected to engage with these multimodal texts as part of their learning, along with written handouts and print examples of photography, and this expectation seems to stem from the new focus of students as 21st Century Learners.

This is an age of multimedia authoring where competency with written words is still vital, but is no longer all that is needed to participate meaningfully in the many spheres of life. Adolescents need facility with an array of multimodal and digital literacies for different social purposes: critical inquiry, creativity, and communication. (Mills, 2010, p. 37)

As Mills states, adolescents *need* to develop multiple literacies because of the changes to the way we are able to communicate. The ease of access adolescents have in order to create, share, and view photographs affords them the option of communicating with each others in ways far removed the days of passing hand-written notes in class.

A distinctive feature of today's literacy scene is the extent to which, and the pace with which, new socially recognized ways of pursuing familiar and novel tasks by means of exchanging and negotiating meanings via encoded artefacts are emerging and being refined. (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007, p. 224)

Acquiring a critically literate approach to texts allows adolescents to deepen their understanding of texts authored by others as well as those they create themselves. Critical literacy affords an awareness of a text's purpose, intended audience, author and multiple

messages contributes to the meaning making that occurs for the reader/viewer (See Photography: Meaning Making below). As more kinds of texts are created, encouraging and aiding adolescents to expand their critical literacies becomes essential to their comprehension of the multiple meanings stemming from their reading/viewing of texts. “Their ability to navigate across, among, and within the complex array of past and emerging literacies has become a reality rather than a hope and for many has become core rather than supplemental” (Tierney, Bond, & Bresler, 2006, p. 359). The adolescents in the photography class I visited engaged with a variety of texts and digital tools and by doing so they were doing more than learning curriculum content. They were discovering new literacies that were shaping their understanding of *how to be* and *who they were* as they developed their identities.

Photography: Making Meaning

Barthes (1980) describes three practices in which a photograph can be the object: “to do, to undergo, to look” (p. 9). His practices refer to the ways people can be involved with a photograph -- making it, being a part of it (included as a subject for instance), and observing it. Participants in this research adopted each role, sometimes concurrently within the same image as they created photographs of themselves and displayed their life experiences.

Everything can be shot, taken or created with the camera -- even our beliefs. A belief tells us what constitutes an event, and by shooting an event we have reaffirmed our belief... The danger is in thinking that these reaffirmed beliefs are true reality or objectivity... [photographs] are *interpretations* of experience and must be read as such. (Quan, 1979, p. 4, emphasis added)

If elements such as feelings, beliefs and memories can be captured in photographs, how are they understood? How are we influenced by what is seen in photographs? What values are contained within them? *What does a photograph mean?* is at once an easy and almost impossible question to answer.

Different sorts of technologies and images offer views of the world; they render the world in visual terms. But this rendering, even by photographs, is never innocent. These images are never transparent windows onto the world. They interpret the world; they display it in very particular ways; they represent it.

(Rose, 2012, p. 2)

Photographs, as Rose (2012) points out, display and represent the world *in very particular ways*. In this quotation, Rose concurs with Quan -- photographs are not objective representations -- and explains that images have been constructed by the photographer. “The photographer’s way of seeing is reflected in his choice of subject” (Berger, 1972, p. 10). It is the constructed-ness of photographs, the intension behind them, and their meanings, and how they reveal aspects of the photographers’ lives that are key aspects of this research study. “All images, despite their relationship to the world, are socially and technically constructed” (Harper, 1998, p 29 as cited in Taylor, 2002, p. 124). The making of a photograph involves motivation and investigating the photographic intentions of adolescent girls provides some reasons as to why photographs are made and what is done with them from the perspective of young women. “How [people] construct imagery and the kinds of technology used to produce them, are considered intrinsic to the interpretations of the phenomena they are intended to represent” (Prosser, 2011, p. 479). Inquiry into the intrinsic features of photography allows adolescent girls’ worldviews to be discovered.

Photographer's Role in Meaning Making

To make a photograph assumes action on the part of the photographer during many parts of the photography process -- selecting the content, choosing what to include/exclude, framing the image, deciding when to capture the image, interpreting meaning(s) and considering what to do with the image once it is made -- edit, delete, share, print etc. Some photographs are made after careful and lengthy consideration of the above mentioned process while other images happen nearly instantaneously, with little thought to process decisions. In this research, investigating the photographs and the meanings that participants offered about their images provided valuable insights about adolescent girls' identities and life experiences, including those related to feminism. Additionally, by probing the thinking and decisions that occurred leading up to the image creation, meaning making and potential sharing of photographs, new knowledge was generated by the participants and the researcher.

“There are multiple layers of meaning in any single photograph” (Luttrell, 2010, p. 225), constructed at the points of creation and representation. As stated above, Barthes' (1980) practices refer to the ways in which people can be involved with a photograph -- making it, being a part of it (included as a subject for instance), and observing it. Participants in this research adopt each role, sometimes within the same image, as they create photographs of themselves and display their life experiences. Depending on how one is involved with a photograph, as Barthes describes, the meaning(s) of the image will vary. Rose (2001) explains where three particular layers of meaning are found: picture making, picture viewing and picture content (p. 233). At each meaning-making moment there is an opportunity for the photographer to create their own interpretations of what the

photograph is conveying. By recognizing the photographer as a simultaneous creator and viewer (taking on the roles of both maker and audience member), the processes of meaning and image making become more complex. Examining adolescents in the roles of maker and viewer of an image *at the same time* can reveal some of the complexity in the meaning of the photographs as well as suggest ways in which adolescents cope with power and control in their lives.

Viewer as Meaning-Maker

When viewing the photographs included in this dissertation it may be helpful to consider Berger's (1972) reminder: "Although every images embodies a way of seeing, our perceptions or appreciation of an image depends also upon our own way of seeing" (p. 10) and as such there are possibly infinite readings of the photographs the girls have shared. As the researcher, it is impossible to contemplate every viewer's possible interpretations of the photographs contained here, however in order to bring some framework to my understanding of the images, I would like to discuss how elements of film and photographic theory have informed my understanding of the way "viewers use images" (Emme, 1989. p. 30) to try and appreciate the interpretations of the girls' photographic collections. As mentioned above, photographs are indexical -- understood partially due to the context in which they are taken, displayed, and by whom they are viewed. Because of images' multiple levels of meaning, most commonly viewers look for the "invested, culturally determined meaning" (Sekula, 1975, p.455). Sekula argues that "Any meaningful encounter with a photograph must necessarily occur at the level of connotation" (p. 455). He expands on how photographs can be understood by describing the discourse of photography, in which he states that a photograph "is an utterance of

some sort” although it is “incomplete” because “the meaning of any photographic message is necessarily context determined” (p. 453). Awareness of the context surrounding a photograph can indicate the cultural meanings associated with it and provide assistance in understanding its meaning. Further possibilities as to how meaning can be discovered are suggested by Andrew (1984).

In *Concepts in Film Theory*, Andrew (1984) argues that it is “in thinking through elaborating, and critiquing the key metaphors by which we seek to understand (and control) the cinema complex” (p. 12) that we are able to understand how the creators and viewers of film interpret film meanings. These metaphors come from Eisenstein and Arnheim who suggested “the spectator as being before a framed image” (p. 12) and Bazin who stated it was “before a window” (p. 12) that he sat when viewing film. No agreement was reached and a third metaphor of the mirror was introduced “to complicate the notion of spectatorial position in front of the screen” (p. 13).

To summarize these cinema-related metaphors and connect them to photographic images I draw on Emme (1989) in which he explained the “meaning(s) of lens meaning” (p. 27). Emme described the *window* metaphor as one in which both the “the producer and consumer can be seen as looking through the same ‘window on reality’” (p. 30) which is assumed to be “unmediated” (p. 30). This notion suggests images to be documentary-like, displaying what is present, without being altered, and creating the impression of a realistic representation of the event. The window metaphor also draws attention to the limitations of what is included and left out of the image (Emme, 1989). The *frame* metaphor “is when we respond to a photograph or film as a construction, like a painting by an artist” (p. 31). Images seem to provide a task for the viewers in which they are expected to “discover the layers of meaning that the artist has intentionally (and

occasionally unintentionally) built into the image” (p. 31). The creator of the photograph or film is somehow present, as their decisions of how the image looks are (usually) noted by the viewer. The metaphor of the mirror is more complicated than the first two. The mirror seems to reflect the world of the viewer back onto themselves. “Like a mirror, the lens image reflects, and some would argue constructs social conventions, and like a mirror, is a site for viewing subjects to work out (consciously or subconsciously) their relationship to those conventions” (p. 31). It is in adopting the metaphors of the frame and mirror that I believe viewers of the participants’ photographs will find connections and aid in their interpretations.

The Participants as Meaning-Makers

In Siegel’s (1995) chapter on meaning making through *transmediation* she suggests that making meaning of a text (through reading/viewing) is a generative event because new knowledge is created during the process. As the participants were viewers of their own and each other’s photographs they engaged in the process of transmediation in a variety of ways. “Something more” (p. 461) becomes known to the reader/viewer when, during the process of *transmediation*, one recreates, responds or explains one text as a different text -- whether it be the same or in a different medium than that in which it was originally produced (p. 461, my emphasis). Examples of this include speaking about an painting one sees at an art gallery, drawing a picture in response to a song one hears, or writing an email reply to a discussion with a colleague. When the participants made photographs they were creators, representors, and meaning-makers and when they took part in the discussion and sharing of their photographs they generated new knowledge through each of these processes. Siegel’s concept of transmediation is useful in

considering how photographs can illustrate life events. “In a sense all photographic images are reflections; viewing a photograph is not the same as viewing the object in real life, and thus photographs allow us to *see any real-life experience in a new way*” (Lipson Lawrence & Cranton, 2009, p. 324, my emphasis). Creating a photograph of a life event or object, re-viewing it in order to making meaning from that photograph and then sharing that meaning (through another medium/text) completes the process of transmediation and moves us away from a consumer (passive) notion towards a more “prosumer” (Tapscott & Williams, 2006) (active) notion of engagement with visual texts. The *active* participation by the photographer in image-making mimics the action taken by prosumers -- those who are not passive consumers but rather active producers in the medium that they are working (i.e. constructing meaning in an image, making a photograph, or contributing content to a website). For the participants, their active role(s) as maker, viewer, and at times subject in their photography allowed them to “construct their own senses of self, their own uses of texts, and their own identities from those uses [as] an enactment of subjectivity” (Hagood, 2004, p. 159) and as an exploration of their process of becoming young adults.

Critical Consideration of Photographs

Taking format, context and function into account upon viewing a photograph influences the meanings that can be derived from the photograph. A critical examination of a text invites the reader/viewer to consider both the obvious and obscure elements and the implicit and explicit meanings. “What is ‘said’ in a text always rests upon ‘unsaid’ assumptions, so part of the analysis of texts is trying to identify what is assumed”

(Fairclough, 2003, p. 11) but Fairclough (2003) cautions that analysis cannot provide a knowledge that is singularly objective, nor all-inclusive.

Reality... cannot be reduced to our knowledge of reality, which is contingent, shifting, and partial. This applies to texts: we should not assume that the reality of texts is exhausted by our knowledge about texts. One consequence is that we should assume that no analysis of a text can tell us all there is to be said about it -- there is no such thing as a complete and definitive analysis of a text. That does not mean they are unknowable... but still inevitably partial. (p. 15)

Asking questions that invite deeper examination expose the subjectivity of one's knowledge, and thus the meaning(s) of a photograph, for example: What has been included and why? What has been left out? Was this purposeful? How do the lens angle, lighting, filter use, and/or focus impact the meaning of the photograph? Were these techniques considered before the shutter release button was pushed? What will be done with this photograph now it exists? Developing a critically literate approach to photographic texts encourages viewers and creators of photographs to be conscious of multiple meanings. This critical approach can also inform photographers about their own identity, as Thomas (2007) suggests, "I am authoring myself through the multimodal texts I produce" (p. 8). The participants' viewing and re-viewing of their own and each other's photographs invited self-awareness and knowledge to be created as they considered critically the works in front of them.

The concept of being engaged with texts in a thoughtful way to further understanding is foundational in new literacies literature (see for example: Bonsor Kurki, 2015; Lankshear & Knobel, 2009; Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004; McLeod & Vasinda, 2008) and is often coupled with critical thinking and/or critical literacies.

Current curriculum in British Columbia encourages critical thinking related to new literacies and media use in and out of school (see for example BC Curriculum English Language Arts, Introduction to Language Arts -- Draft, 2015). Lankshear and Knobel (2007) emphasize the shift in ethos related to new literacies, specifically the “intensely ‘participatory’, ‘collaborative’ and ‘distributed’ nature of many current and emerging practices within formal and non-formal spheres of everyday engagement” (p. 226-7). While photography is certainly not a new literacy, images are ubiquitous in their inclusion within new literacies, and the onslaught of technologies and digital media available to youth present ways in which photographs are being re-invented as new modes of communication. Although a thorough documentation of adolescents’ involvement with images in their everyday habits may be beyond the scope of this research, their thinking related to their photographic practices and meaning making can certainly offer beneficial knowledge about their critical engagement with photographs.

Post-feminism

My Feminist Ethos

I have adopted a critical feminist approach for this research (and often my life) and thus feel it vital to explain my own understandings of feminisms as they influence all aspects of this work. “Feminism is anti-sexism” (hooks, 2000, p. 12) and it is also an invitation to critically engage and problematize formal and informal institutions and circumstances that structure our society. Contemporary feminisms have been built on the tireless efforts of First, Second, and Third Wave feminists, who fought for women to be legally recognized as people and equals in the eyes of the law, who struggled to try to

achieve equity for all people, regardless of their gender, socioeconomic status, ability, and other identity markers, and who pushed to recognize that a variety of feminisms are necessary in order to represent the inequalities still existing in our culture today (McBride, 2010).

With a global view on equity, power, access to information, and freedoms, Third Wave feminism opened the door to many debates about what it means to be a feminist. This is the feminism that I grew up in. My understandings about what it means to be a feminist involve trying to end sexism (hooks, 2000) and promote respect for people of all sexes and genders. This includes embracing equity, which allows for differences based on needs, instead of equality, which assumes everyone's needs are the same. It also involves challenging and questioning power (McBride, 2010) and exposing discriminatory behaviours that have become ingrained in society and institutions. Critical feminism (including the processes of looking for missing information, questioning sources of information, and becoming aware of the dominant norms in our society as a form of oppression) is essential in my understanding of feminisms because it encourages praxis. Also key to my feminist knowledge is the concept of intersectionality, and how one's "gender and other identity features (skin colour, ethnicity, life roles, sexuality, etc.)" (Cole, 2009) come together to help shape a person's identity. As identity was a prominent theme arising from the data, awareness of intersectionality prompted my analysis and interpretations of the data.

The current period of feminism in which the participants have been growing up has been labelled by some scholars as Fourth Wave feminism (Munro, 2013), while others argue for the use of post-feminism (see below). "Contemporary feminism is characterised by its diversity of purpose, and amid the cacophony of voices it is easy to

overlook one of the main constants within the movement as it currently stands -- its reliance on the internet” (Munro, 2013, p. 22). Technology, especially in Western cultures, seems to permeate all aspects of life and in turn its messages can influence youth throughout their daily lives. For those who may choose to seek them out, the Internet’s feminists are using this technology for both discussion/education and activism on a global scale (p. 23). It is the current cultural circumstances (including a substantial emphasis on communication using digital devices and pervasive media messages) that bring forth the significance between feminism and the post-feminist movement in relation to this research.

Defining Post-feminism

Post-feminism refers “to an active process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and 80s come to be undermined” (McRobbie, 2004, p. 255). It is a term that has existed for two decades and is “used variously and contradictorily to signal a theoretical position, a type of feminism after the Second Wave, or a regressive political stance” (Gill, 2007, p. 148). Gill argues that post-feminism is “a *sensibility* that characterizes increasing numbers of films, television shows, advertisements, and other media products” that can be used to “contribute to the task of unpacking postfeminist media culture” (p. 148, emphasis added). Whether it is a stance, a movement, a sensibility, or something else, Adriaens (2009) recognizes the inability to pin down one distinct definition and suggests that “post feminism has no fixed meaning; it is a contradictory, pluralistic discourse that is mainly located in the academic context of television and cultural studies, in the media context of popular culture and within consumer culture” (Para. 1). For the purposes of this research I adopt Gill’s (2007) idea that “arguments about postfeminism are debates about

nothing less than the transformations in feminism and transformations in media culture -- and their mutual relationship” (p. 147). It was noticeable that the participants’ feminist experiences and knowledge differed significantly from my own, suggesting to me that transformations are occurring in feminism in teenage girls’ life experiences. In addition to post-feminism’s presence in media culture and youth experience, it also exists within academia where it is housed at “the intersection of feminism with postmodernism, poststructuralism and postcolonialism and as such represents a dynamic movement capable of challenging modernist, patriarchal and imperialist frameworks” (Brooks, 1997, p. 4). Adriaens (2009) points out that among these philosophies, “the link is obvious since all paradigms are concerned with breaking through binary thinking. They question authoritarian paradigms and fixed, universal categories such as ‘gender’ or ‘heteronormativity’” (Para. 2). “Postfeminism also critiques oppression or discrimination based on other aspects of one’s identity” (Lotz, 2001, 115). The critical nature of post-feminism does seem to invoke positive steps towards interrogating the potential limitations of previous feminist waves, however, when situated within the context of mass media’s constructed, fantastical, and fictitious “realities”, the critical awareness can be lost, as are the gains of feminisms past.

The Paradox of Post-feminism

Post-feminism cannot exist without feminism. Post-feminism is a reaction to, and criticism of previous feminist thinking and actions, and without which postfeminism’s success to be promulgated through mass media could not occur. “Elements of contemporary popular culture are perniciously effective in regard to this undoing of feminism, while simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even

well-intended response to feminism” (McRobbie, 2004, p. 255). Gill (2007) describes the complicated relationship of post-feminism existing as

Clearly a response to feminism... a backlash (Faludi, 1992; Whelehan, 2000; Williamson, 2003) but one could argue that it is more complex than this, precisely because of its tendency to entangle feminist and anti-feminist discourses. Feminist ideas are at the same time articulated and repudiated, expressed and disavowed.
(p. 163)

McRobbie (2011) further explains the necessity of feminism to post-feminism but also how its role has changed in today’s society. “Post-feminism registers, time and again, the seeming gains and successes of the second wave of the women’s movement, implying that ‘things have changed’, so feminism is now irrelevant” (p.180). While acknowledging the difficulty in defining post-feminism, it is because of the comparisons and contradictions to feminism that Gill (2007) is able to narrow down its qualities, providing more specific concepts that help describe the contemporary post-feminist crusade:

The notion that femininity is a bodily product; this shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis upon self surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism; choice and empowerment; the dominance of the makeover paradigm; a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference; a marked sexualization of culture; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference. (p. 149)

The changes in how women *should* live (as outlined above) produce a discourse that is frequently pushing for female individualization (McRobbie, 2011). “Postfeminism constructs an articulation or suture between feminist and anti-feminist ideas, and this is

effected entirely through a grammar of individualism that fits perfectly with neoliberalism” (Gill, 2007, p. 162).

Post-feminism & Neoliberalism

“Neoliberalism is understood increasingly as constructing individuals as entrepreneurial actors who are rational, calculating and self-regulating. The individual must bear full responsibility for their life biography, no matter how severe the constraints upon their action” (Gill, 2007, p. 163). The emphasis of the neoliberalist ethos upon self-regulation, individualism, and competition promotes similar societal norms that post-feminism also purports. With mass media presenting ideas to which both philosophies seem to adhere, it is no wonder that the ideals of feminisms become oppressed.

Freedom and Oppression

Over a decade ago, McRobbie (2004) wrote about a new group of women who were being shaped by post-feminism. “The new female subject is, despite her freedom, called upon to be silent, to withhold critique, to count as a modern sophisticated girl, [but] this withholding of critique is a condition of her freedom” (p. 260). The ubiquitousness of media messages educate female youth in many aspects of their lives, so much so that they do not realize the ways in which they are shaped and boxed in by the messages. For instance, many of the participants in this research insisted that they altered their appearance for themselves, knowing only how they wanted to look -- but never questioning how they came to know that “the look” they wished to achieve had been carefully constructed for them and that they had been manipulated by media’s messages. Rather, it seemed to be almost a statement of pride, albeit a naïve one because of their

lack of awareness of how post-feminist messages had encroached on their independence. “The notion that all our practices are freely chosen is central to postfeminist discourses, which present women as autonomous agents no longer constrained by any inequalities or power imbalances whatsoever” (Gill, 2007, p. 153). However, oppression exists covertly as the power of corporations and social institutions feeds the postfeminist discourses to which Gill refers and presents norms to which young women strive to model.

Nexus: A Polysemiotic Expression

In addition to nexus being defined formally by using a dictionary (See chapter 1), I would like to explain how I have commissioned the term nexus in two ways within this research. The first is as a practical model in shaping the findings and analysis of this research, which will be expanded upon in chapters 4 - 7. A nexus suggests linking and relationships and I have used the term nexus as a way to describe the simultaneous independence and interconnectivity of the emergent themes from the data. Adopting the term in this way afforded me the ability to partially separate out certain key findings for discussion and analysis while allowing them to remain part of the larger whole.

The second application of this term is more epistemological in nature, for both myself as researcher and indirectly, for the participants as subjective knowers of their own experiences and accompanying photography. Nexus in this sense has been adopted as a theoretical concept that has been informed by the Deleuzian notion of “the fold” (Deleuze, 1993). Deleuze’s post-structuralist views emphasize finding multiple sources to help in the interpretation and critique of texts. As I have already stated above, photographs contain myriad meanings and the viewer (in this case, the researcher and the participants) is an active participant in creating her own understandings based on what is

being viewed, and in what context. With this in mind, Deleuze's ideas related to the fold and how they have influenced my use of nexus will be explained.

Deleuze described the "pleats of matter and the folds of the soul" (1993, p. 3) as sites of subjectivity formation. These folds, which lie in ever-increasing proximity to one another, emphasize the individuality of how one comes to know about their experiences and the world (O'Sullivan, 2005, p. 102). Scholars of Deleuze discuss his "enfolding and unfolding" as processes that address how what we perceive arrives at us (Marks, 2014, p. 53) and these processes need both movement/change and resistance in order to occur (O'Sullivan, 2005, p. 106). In essence, each fold is influenced by and connected to the folds on each side of it, as they move, shift, change, and resist concurrently as a unified whole and as separate parts, with the continuing opportunity for further folds to be created.

Nexus then, as a theoretical concept, relates to Deleuze's idea of folds as various sites of meaning, being connected by one's subjectivity, while also acknowledging those sites (and in turn, one's subjectivity) as being influenced by multiple factors, which in the case of this research into photography and female youth experiences include: social and institutional structures, identity exploration, personal experience, and aesthetic and technical visuality. In addition, the capacity for resistance and future change are present, as the layers of meaning in the photographs, stories, and life experiences become known.

Literature Review Summary

Adolescents form their identities based on their life experiences and how they are shaped by external influences around them. Increased technologies and ways to explore, share, and present identities of self make adolescence an often public process, into which

many teens struggle to fit.

Photography, and making meaning from photographs, is complex. As makers, viewers, and subjects of their images, participants of this study had multiple opportunities to view, consider, and explain their images, and respond to the images that they made. A critical approach to the photographic collections of the girls was adopted by the researcher and is suggested to those viewing the girls' photographs.

Feminism cannot be easily defined but in this chapter my understanding of it and how it informs the research have been explained. Post-feminism is a counter-concept created decades ago, but that insidiously permeates much of the participants' data, as well as the context in which their photography and stories are situated.

The use of nexus as a theoretical framework and also as a model for which to build an understanding around the findings and analysis is a newly proposed concept, created by me having been informed by Deleuze's concept of "the fold". The use of the term nexus in this way allows for a layered expression of multiple meanings and practical organization of data and knowledge drawn from the research.

Chapter 3: Methodology and Research Design

Introduction

Photographs, whether those of common places, of common events, or of unique events, are a way of sharing experiences -- the everydayness of lived experience. (Bach, 2007, p. 282)

In this chapter I begin by describing the theoretical frameworks informing this qualitative work: critical feminism and arts-based inquiry -- specifically photo elicitation and visual narrative inquiry. I provide a detailed explanation of the participants (both how they were selected and descriptions that will aid the reader in knowing a bit more about whom the findings are based) and conducting this research over a six-month period made a significant impact on the data collected and the relationship that built between the participants and myself. Next the specifics that describe the data collection and analysis processes are described at length and finally my positionality as researcher is discussed. The above quotation highlights the significance of how feminist theory, which emphasizes “sharing experiences,” photography, and the girls’ personal histories come together in creating, understanding, and disseminating this research.

Critical Feminist Perspective

This research centres on young women, feminism and their identities as represented through their photography. Critical feminist methodology offers a strong framework from which to approach the analysis of data as it encourages collaboration through analysis and comparison of life experiences between participants and with the researcher, it allows the researcher to address intersectionality, and it challenges control

and power. “‘Intersectionality’ refers to the interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power” (Davis, 2008, p. 68). Although not a primary focus, intersectionality informed the data analysis as the adolescents shared and explored the multiple selves they presented through their photographic practice and accompanying narratives. As feminist arts-based research, this work is “not neutral but seek[s] to identify and disrupt inequitable knowledge/power patterns” (Clover, 2011, p. 14) as the participants explore and share their visual texts and through my own analysis.

Cole (2009) suggests that instead of “doing gender” we need to “undo gender” (p. 568) and one approach to this is by “turning the spotlight on social processes ...and exploring the multiple intersections through individual and collective narratives” (p. 568). By exploring the experiences of young women we can learn more about the “social processes” that create cultural rules that strongly shape their identities. Cole agrees with Butler (1999) who suggests that identity and societal norms are closely linked -- perhaps one and the same.

To what extent is “identity” a normative ideal rather than a descriptive feature of experience? And how do the regulatory practices that govern gender also govern culturally intelligible notions of identity? In other words, the “coherence” and “continuity” of “the person” are not logical or analytic features of personhood, but, rather, socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility. (p. 23)

Although I have not been able to answer Butler’s queries definitively, I include them as a reminder that the participants themselves were sometimes unclear on why they think/ behave/ look the way they do given what their cultural group influences them to do.

Their own exploration into how they looked, thought, and behaved revealed aspects of their identities and maturation and contributed to their sense of agency over themselves during their adolescent years as they challenged and struggled with the societal pressures that affected them.

Examining the photographic collections and stories for expressions of gender, through intersectional directions, identifying photographic content and technique, and artistic expression, provided a deeper understanding about female youth identity. One aspect of the research involved the participants viewing and discussing each other's photographs. This collaborative investigation and initial analysis was an important way to help adolescent voices stay central to the research. Presser (2005) states that paying attention to “comparisons and contrasts—between people and between selves (over time)—as essential to the coherence of the narratives and thus to identity” (p. 2075) is a key aspect of the research process. Sharing of experience is a feminist methodology tenet as well as a social activity, something with which the adolescent participants had the opportunity to experience at the end of the research during the focus group meetings.

I would argue that nearly all teenagers have felt powerless at some point of their adolescent experience. This is sometimes connected with the expected angst of being young but not always. Critical feminist methodologies encourage the investigation of power relationships -- whether they are between an individual and institutions, cultural norms, or family members. Harding (1987) explains that an “epistemology is a theory of knowledge -- it answers questions about who can be a “knower”...what kinds of things can be known” (p. 3) and I think that part of the reason adolescents feel powerless is because they are assumed *not* to be “knowers”. “The adolescent has consistently been offered as an essentialised, flawed, and incomplete being within a metadiscourse of age”

(Stevens et al., 2007, p. 108). The deficit approach to describe adolescents is further outlined by Stevens et al. as they refer to the way adolescents can be seen as a marginalized group of society.

The discourses surrounding young people in society relegate them to limited, precarious and marginalized positions. Through this view the adolescent is in a constant state of flux, at the will of her hormones, delimited by definition, and suspended by biology from reality. (p. 112-3)

To help share the power between researcher and participants, open-ended questions, conversations and participant-generated topics for discussion were incorporated, to place an emphasis on the knowings that the adolescent girls were bringing to and discovering during the project.

An Arts-Based Research Approach

Arts-based narrative inquiry can enhance an identity investigation because it is an inquiry that considers more than art works and interviews. Arts-based narrative inquiry combines two (or more) media, which offer new ways of knowing about identity for the participants and the researcher. My research is considered *arts-based* rather than arts-informed. This distinction is made by de Mello (2007), who uses definitions of *base* and *inform* to help clarify and define arts-based narrative inquiry and arts-informed narrative inquiry.

When art is applied in narrative inquiry as part of the method, as a way of composing and gathering field texts, it is considered to be *the base* of the whole research process. In this case, art is the beginning of everything. (emphasis added, p. 214)

It is important to note that one's research can be both arts-based and arts-informed, where artistic and aesthetic works are created by the researcher in presenting data for others to experience. There are aspects of the research findings that contain artistic expressions of meaning (my own) that provide an additional site of viewing/meaning-making based on the participants' photographs.

“Creativity and artistic production are driven by a desire to communicate feelings and ideas; and that such works will almost inevitably tell us something about their creator” (Gauntlett, 2007, p. 30). The increased access many adolescents have to digital technologies affords other kinds of artistic endeavours also: photo manipulation -- like adding filters, borders, adjusting light and colour; layering images; creating slide shows with added multimodal effects, like sound or text; or crafting digital collages. The time taken to make these artistic works increases the time participants have for reflection and consideration of the images and their meanings. Gauntlett (2007) insists that time for reflection produces deeper and more authentic responses from participants as they have time to consider what is being asked of them, rather than having to say something to fill the silence during an interview. The element of time was added in to the participants' experience as they selected which photographs to submit to the project and then had to wait days before they were reunited with their photographs during the interviews.

Photo Elicitation

Taylor (2002) believes, based on McDonald and Krause's (1995) idea that referring to photographs during interviews with participants will encourage reflective learning, that throughout this process “the photographs are not merely being interpreted by participants, but have the potential to promote a deeper understanding of their

underlying values and assumptions about the environment, and contribute to the development of new understandings of the self” (Taylor, 2002, p. 126). The photograph itself becomes an entrance into identity. Bach’s (2001) participants found that photographs allowed them to “document their coming to know their subcultures and how [these] experiences affect them as learners, as knowers” (para. 3). Photographs contain many things -- physical items as well as emotions, concepts, representations of self and peers and so on. Review of photographs can offer multiple opportunities to explore and discover a variety of meanings. “Pictures... enable us to present information, ideas or feelings simultaneously, without the material being forced into an order or hierarchy” (Gauntlett, 2007, p. 183). This allows the participant to highlight what she sees as most important, contributing more to the agency of the participant during the interview process. Photographs also “offer a different kind of glimpse into human sense-making than written...texts do, because they can express that which is not easily put into words: the ineffable, the elusive, the not-yet-thought-through, the subconscious” (Weber & Mitchell, 1995, p. 34). (See also Croghan, et al., 2008; Taylor, 2002). Explicitly stating one’s identity is quite a tough task (and perhaps it one of the possibilities that Weber and Mitchell refer to as being “not easily put into words”) but allowing the elements of the participant’s photograph to speak on behalf of the photographer is one way to get to the aspects of identities that might elude us when speaking about ourselves. Kirova and Emme (2008) also make this point, stating that “photography [can be used] as a form of capturing and communicating the “unspeakable” in the experience” (p. 37). As Berger (1972) points out, “the photographer’s way of seeing is reflected in the choice of subject” (p. 10). When participants are sharing their own photographs, they may be presenting facets of their identities that are not fully embraced as central to their core or self. These

aspects may invite new themes into the conversation between researcher and participant, which enable further exploration of the facets of participant identity.

Photo elicitation is an “important tool for building bridges with marginalized groups in the research process, since it offers researchers a way to let participants speak for themselves” (Noland, 2006, p. 1; see also Hagood, 2004). Adolescents can be included within the classification of ‘marginalized’ since they are not often heard from in research, or in society in general. Instead, teachers, parents and other adults with whom they are involved often speak their ideas for them or they remain silent. Photo elicitation allows for both visual and verbal information to be shared between the researcher and the participants. “Using the visual image to bolster identity claims and employing the verbal accounts to edit and contextualise the identity implications of the visual image” (Croghan, et al., 2008, p. 346) provides context for both sources of data – the interview and the photographic image. Context can help direct the researcher’s, photographer’s and/or participant’s, and other viewers’ meaning making about the identity aspects that are included within the photographs and in the interviews. Having multiple sources from which to draw offers an opportunity for the researcher and possibly the participant to create new knowledge about the participant’s life experiences and in turn, the research.

Visual Narrative Inquiry

“Visual narrative inquiry is an intentional, reflective, active human process in which researchers and participants explore and make meaning of experience both visually and narratively” (Bach, 2007, p. 281). Visual narrative inquiry informed my research because it encouraged artistic expressive knowledge to be shared through photographic works by participants and to be coupled with reflective and discursive discussion and life

experience stories. Clover (2006) emphasizes the role of the photographs within visual methodologies: “They affect the viewer by carrying rich and abundant symbolic details that make them a voice for the artists” (p.278) who are, in this research, young women whose voices are often not heard or valued. Inviting visual ways of knowing and communicating contributed to my understanding of the participants’ identities and developing selves. Drawing heavily from Hedy Bach’s work as a visual narrative inquirer, I have learned how this methodology has impacted my work -- from participant relationships to data collection, analysis and reporting.

Two aspects of Bach’s work have strongly influenced the approach I used in my research: collaborative sharing of life stories through photographs and the ethical concerns for both myself and the participants as the photographs/field texts are created, viewed and shared.

As individuals compose their lives, they tell stories of those experiences, and one of the ways in which individuals tell their stories is through the photographs that they take and through the photographs that others take of them. As photographs and stories are shared, resonance across stories becomes apparent, and what might be seen as old common ground is revealed, even as new common ground among persons is created. (Bach 2007, p. 282)

Bach suggests that collaborative meaning making and discussion are helpful in revealing the multiple meanings in photographs. The accompanying stories contributed to the meanings of the photographs as well as provided context and uncovered aspects of identities of the participants. As an outsider (not currently being an adolescent girl myself) I can only understand from an outsider’s point of view, however the photographs and stories invited the participants and me to find “common

ground”, as Bach suggested. The context of the photographs and stories of the participants directly informed my meaning making about their identities and life experiences.

Bach (2001) writes about the “evaded curriculum” and the silencing of young women. I attempted to provide “spaces for them to show and tell their stories” (para. 1) and also convey my genuine interest in what they were sharing. I also was attentive to Bach’s awareness of the ethical responsibilities involved when working with a minority group, and with their photographs/field texts.

I am mindful of my responsibility as a researcher of how photographs taken by and of youth are made public. I ask myself, What are my ethical intentions as a visual researcher creating field texts and research texts? What are each participant's intentions? What "good" will come of this? These are ethical questions of which I am constantly mindful. (Bach, 2007, p. 297)

The data I collected was personal and public. Some photographs were not shared before I saw them while others had been on social media for weeks before they were sent to me. Mitchell (2011) highlights the ethical challenges involved:

With the proliferation of digital images through Facebook and other social networking sites where it is so easy to upload images, it is hard to know where to start in mapping out the range of ethical issues when dealing with the visual.

It is also a terrain that is quickly changing. (p. 15)

The ethical issues to which Mitchell refers must vary for each visual researcher, however, having worked with adolescents in the past I felt prepared to ethically address their protection and anonymity where necessary. Because of the potential for misunderstanding in how the girls’ photographs could be incorporated into the

research, I made it very clear to the girls that I would never post their images to social media (with or without their names accompanying their photographs) because the photographic collections of each girl contained/reflected identity-related information about her, her family, and friends and the potential for dangerous misuse was too great. Participating in social media and academic dissemination are quite different acts however in both cases the girls' photography will exist online forever.

My Politics of Ethics and Participant Privacy

When entering into this project, the girls and I agreed that at least some of their images could be considered as artistic work and as such, they wanted to be recognized as the creators of it. This led me to seriously consider what it would mean to make their art data, and how their art/data could be used by me, and once disseminated, used by others. On the one hand the girls being publically recognized for a photograph could have led to opportunities and/or positive affirmation by others that their photography skills were being noticed. Conversely, the many details about their lives, coupled with their photographs could make them targets of identity theft, or worse. The participants seemed to convey a solid understanding of their privacy rights connected to this research and to the photographs (artwork) and stories they gave me, however their comprehension of the fact that I could be presenting their photographs and narratives in ways they may not have thought about -- or agreed with -- was hard to guarantee. My decision about which data should remain private/personal and which data shall be publicized was made -- after careful contemplation, the girls' faces have been blurred out of all photographs included within the dissertation so as to keep them anonymous, despite the fact that they all

agreed to being named and shown in this research.

Research Design and Implementation

Brief Overview of Study

This qualitative inquiry began with conducting semi-structured interviews mainly individually, with each of the eight participants over a six-month period. The interviews were based on topics originating from each participant's photographs that had been previously sent to the researcher and that were printed in advance for viewing during the interview. Each interview was audio and video recorded and transcriptions were made of interviews for use during the analysis process. Transcripts were sent to the participants so they could check for accuracy and make any changes. Necessary revisions were then made to the transcripts by the researcher. Analysis was done using NVivo software and open coding methods to uncover prominent themes within the data.

Participants

The participants in this study were 8 adolescent girls, drawn from a local high school. (Descriptions of the three participants who provided the majority of data for analysis follow below. The other five are listed in Appendix A.) It is during adolescence, as mentioned above, that identities are explored and the self is discovered. It was central that the participants were female adolescents (aged 12-19), as it emphasizes the importance of gender and feminism in the research, and because they are my primary interest and concern. Young women do not have enough opportunities to express themselves or explore the fullness of who they are becoming as they move through adolescence. With countless influences from society suggesting/hounding/enforcing how

they should be, their negotiation through the teen years is a treacherous and vastly important element of their lives to be investigated. The photographs about their lives provided an alternative and often neglected resource that helped me understand how they were engaging in and communicating in the world and finding their way through society's norms.

Researching (with) participants who self-identified as *often* taking photographs was a key aspect of recruitment because the data collection phase lasted 7 months and if the participants did not enjoy making, viewing and talking about photographs it would have been hard to retain them for the whole period. As McCarthy and Moje (2002) point out, strong links are found between the texts with which adolescents read/create and their identity formation. By selecting adolescent girls that take photographs *often* as participants, I gained access to a wide range of photographs, taken in varying contexts and made with varying intentions. I approached students in two photography courses in the high school; Photography 11 and Photography 12 and all eight of the participants came from these two courses, however one participant was in Grade 10. Recruiting participants who had enrolled in these courses provided me with access to students that demonstrated an interest in photography, as the courses were electives so they had chosen to be there.

Participant Descriptions

(Italicized text is used throughout to indicate direct quotations from participants' interviews)

Amanda

Amanda is 17 years old and in her last year of high school. She lives with her mother, stepfather and younger brother. Her mom's "obsession" for photographing sunsets is one of the reasons Amanda has become more involved in photography. As well as nature and sunsets, Amanda likes to photograph people. *"I like taking pictures of people, like, portraits of them... And I'm practicing doing self portraits but not like just selfies but trying to be creative and so I've been doing that."* Music is also a huge part of her life: practicing and rehearsing on her flute, allowing her to travel with the school band, and providing opportunities for her to perform and create. This fall she plans on studying music at university along with Spanish. Amanda describes herself as *"less shy than she used to be"* and finds that sometimes her photographs reveal more about her than she is comfortable with.

Netra

Netra is 16 years old. She was born in Canada to Indian parents and is the youngest of three sisters. She has long, dark brown wavy hair, brown eyes and a big smile. Her sister once described her cheeks as *"stuffed with water"*. She laughs a lot and shares her opinions readily about topics ranging from why men are responsible for war and why going to school without make-up is something she simply cannot do. She loves KPop (Korean-Pop) music and is interested in learning new languages so she can see the uniqueness in the parts that make her. She wants to be multicultural and different. Her family and friends are incredibly important to her, influencing how she behaves and what she thinks about the world. Netra's photographic practice is centered on her personal experiences.

Sometimes I take pictures of my nails. Sometimes I take pictures of how I look, cause sometimes I like how my eye shadow looks, how I feel -- like sometimes I might feel good so I take pictures. Sometimes I take pictures of random stuff, like my pillows and I usually... when I go out for family -- when we go to different places, I like to take pictures so you have memories and stuff. The pictures are nice.

Sea

Sea is 17 years old and in grade 11. She recently moved to back to British Columbia after spending years living in Colorado, USA. She believes that it's important for people to “*experience more than one place in your life*” so you can discover “*how you are*” in each location. Sea thinks a lot about who she is and finding “*that thing that's like, my purpose*” in life. She values openness and honesty and enjoys looking for deep meaning in her experiences. She practices artistic hobbies: photography, drawing, and painting; and her creativity extends to her appearance: shaving half her hair off last year, dyeing her hair frequently, experimenting with make-up, and her clothing. Sea's photographic practice has changed in the recent past.

I feel like I used to take a lot more pictures than I do now, with my phone and stuff but it just gets kind of -- I guess stressful cause... I feel like I'm OCD. If I have a bunch of pictures all over my phone I'm never gonna go through all of them, like thousands of pictures so I just try to only take pictures when it's something cool or something that I want to remember... It's annoying to me cause I don't want to have a bunch of stuff and have to worry about going through [it all].

Her goal now is to take fewer images that mean more to her and are better quality photographs, rather than how she used to use her camera (see quotation above). She often shares her photographs on Instagram for her friends and family to see.

Time

The data collection portion of this research occurred during a seven-month period, from early in the school year to the spring. Over this extended time period the participants were able to take numerous photographs that they shared with the other participants and me. This extended time frame also acknowledges that the participants were maturing and exploring their identities, which afforded learning new understandings about themselves and what their photographs meant. Researching the adolescent girls' photographs and identities during a prolonged period also provided the participants and me an opportunity to revisit early images and respond and reflect on them. "Barthes (1977) notes, photography has a certain ambiguity arising from the discontinuity between the moment recorded and the moment of looking, making the photograph amenable to a range of subsequent interpretations" (Croghan et al., 2008, p. 352). Because the photographs were discussed multiple times during the seven-month period, the "range of subsequent interpretations" of the photographs were compared and the participants identified similarities and/or contrasts among their own photographs and in the whole collection. I met each participant approximate every two to three weeks between January and June of 2014. Discussions about their photographs provided initial responses and time for reflection about the similarities and/or contrasts, which furthered deeper understanding about the central ideas related to the photographs being reviewed.

Qualitative Data Collection

After my recruitment talks I had interest from seven girls. In December 2013 I met with each participant individually to ensure they were comfortable with the project and to see if they were willing to continue to meet as part of a group. It was during this first meeting that I also conducted a semi-structured interview to gain background information about the participant and her photographic practice. I also outlined the plans for the rest of the data collection period.

In January 2014 the participants met with me in a focus group to find out about the goals of the project, to meet each other, and to begin sharing their photographs. Using my own interests and skills in photography I had intended to offer the girls a photography club format for meeting. This club was supposed to be a focus group-type meeting where viewing and discussion of participants' photographs occurred, new skills and techniques were shared and, occasionally the participants would choose themes or subjects they wanted to photograph. After the first focus group meeting I struggled with a few things: to get the girls to agree on a time at which they were available to meet; to remember to come to the meetings; and/or to remember to send me photographs before the meetings. I also had one participant leave the project. I had a few concerns that some of the other girls might also leave so to ensure that I had enough participants to continue the research I recruited two more girls from another Photography 11 course being held, bringing the total number of active participants to eight.

Since the girls were unable to meet regularly as a group, I met with the girls individually approximately every two or three weeks, depending on their schedules. Leading up to the interviews I asked the girls to review any and all photographs they

had made since our previous meeting and select up to 10 images that they felt would help me get to know about them and their experience as an adolescent girl. This was the only instruction given about what photographs the girls should be making and/or selecting. It was very important that the girls choose their own photographs, as they would best know the ones that represented their lives and themselves. As Prosser (2011) stated in his chapter on Visual Methodology, “Clark-Ibanez (2007) ... recognizes that participants are expert in their own lives and able to define or refine the research, the agenda, and process” (p. 484). By encouraging and being open to whatever the girls wanted to show me and talk about, I was able to honour their voices throughout this research, as well as gain valuable insight about their experiences and to what they valued in their lives. During each interview meeting the participant talked about her own photographs from that meeting, reviewed her previous submissions, and then viewed and responded to the photographs of the other group members, when time permitted.

The interview process went like this: Through email I received the girl’s digital photograph files and printed them in advance of our meeting. Upon arriving at the school I set out the most recent set of photographs that I had been sent. When the girl arrived I made small talk to ‘take the temperature’ of the participant. I wanted to know a little about how she was feeling, what mood she was in, what had been happening in her life lately. These elements helped me know a bit more about her and re-break the ice each time we met, but more importantly, they provided me some guidance as to how to proceed with the interview. For instance, when Ashley arrived feeling stressed and distracted about her upcoming math test in the period that followed our meeting, I knew jumping right into a discussion of her photographs

might not produce the depth of answers that I was hoping to get. The small talk allowed her to share about her life and also gave me a chance to steer the conversation back to her photographs less abruptly. When the participant seemed ready I began by asking “tell me about your photographs.” I felt it was vital that the girls’ guided the conversations, selecting which photographs to discuss, in which order, and also giving them the opportunity to direct the stories being shared. This procedure seemed to me to remove some of the formality of “an interview with Sarah” and encouraged them to speak freely on topics of their choosing. For the girls who were a bit more shy, or who felt somewhat uncomfortable, getting to choose what was discussed afforded them some power in the situation, by which I hoped would help them relax or feel more comfortable.

After having met with each girl between five and seven times, in June 2014 I held two final focus group meetings to finish off the data collection. Up until the final focus groups, the girls had been viewing their own and each other photographs repeatedly during the data collection period, but discussion among the girls that had not occurred prior to this -- they had only been talking with me about what they were seeing. The first focus group was to re-view the whole group’s photographic collection of 222 images. The second was themed around feminism, their photographs, and their own experiences.

The purpose of the focus groups at the end of the data collection was to bring the girls together and give them an opportunity to reflect on the photographs as representations of aspects of their lives -- viewing their individual experiences captured in their pictures as site of potential shared familiarities -- texts of “visual culture” (Freedman, 2006, p.26).

Rather than being merely the outward expression of an individual, visual culture acts as a circuit of communication: it connects artists to audiences, audience members to each other, and audiences to artists through commonalities of experience in their engagement with images and objects” (Freedman, 2006, p. 26).

Freedman (2006) uses the term “visual culture” to help explain how groups (in this case adolescent girls) define themselves. Visual culture within a social group forms through “the establishment of meaningful symbol systems, the creation of agreed upon cultural capital, and the telling of visual narratives of common experience” (p. 26). In the final two focus groups the participants’ photographs and their stories encouraged connections between the participants by emphasizing the visual aspects of their identities, experiences and beliefs (visual culture). The photographs offered representations of the participants’ view on their world and contained “commonalities of experience”, as Freedman states above (See also Bach, 2007).

The logistics of the data collection included a lot of digital data. The girls sent me digital files of their photographs (up to ten per interview) through a secure email server housed at the University. I then stored these files on my password protected laptop computer and in a secure i-drive also within the university’s server. Once they were sent to me I printed them at home and then we used the printed photographs as discussion starters during the interviews. The girls had an opportunity to reflect on their own photographic collection during their initial selection and then again during our interviews. The multiple opportunities for reflection and consideration of the photographs happened over a period of days or even a week. Time was necessary for the photographs, stories, and identities to be reconsidered and reflected upon to gain new knowledge.

Individuals' ongoing life stories are their identities, for stories—and identities—are constantly being renegotiated as new experiences shed light on and help make meaning of the old ones. From a life-story perspective, then, identity is inherently dynamic and reciprocal, shaping the identity in the telling of the story itself. (Faircloth, 2012, p. 192)

I had intended to provide some kind of final product for the participants, like a photo book of their select images or an exhibit of some kind, however due to their busy schedules and a local teachers' strike action I was unable to continue meeting with them to facilitate this part of the project.

Data Analysis

Data collected in this study included: the participants' photographs (222), interview recordings/transcripts (44), and focus group recordings/transcripts (3), see Table 1: Participant Information. Once the interviews were transcribed they were sent to the participants so they had an opportunity to review them and to clarify or correct the text where necessary. This review allowed for member-checking to occur as well as offer another occasion for the participants to consent to their work and ideas to be included within the project.

A critical feminist perspective and visual narrative inquiry informed the analysis of the photographs, stories, and conversations. Initially, data were coded using open-coding using NVivo software (QSR International, 2015) and these codes mostly related to content of the photographs and comments being made by the girls, such as Nature; Netra-Family; Facebook; Appearance. A subsequent review of the interviews prompted me to

Table 1

Participant Information

Name	Age	Grade	Number of Photographs Submitted	Cameras Used
Amanda	17	12	21	Nikon V1 DSLR, phone camera
Ashley	17	12	12	Step-Dad's Nikon DSLR, phone camera, Canon PowerShot A1400*
Erin	16	11	39	Ipad Mini, Canon PowerShot A1400*
Joyce	15	10	34	Canon T3i DSLR, phone camera
Lori	17	12	7	Canon PowerShot A1400*
Riko	17	11	30	Phone camera, single lens camera of sister's in Japan, Canon PowerShot A1400*
Netra	16	11	32	Canon PowerShot A1400*
Sea	17	11	47	Motorola Razor phone camera, Samsung point and shoot, Minolta film camera

* Canon PowerShot A1400 This camera was provided to the participants who needed a camera so they could participate in the research. Initially they were loaned to the girls, however at the end of the project I surprised them by gifting the cameras to them to keep. the participants

create additional nodes that described the purpose of the comments and photographs, like Why Take a Photo; Sea tells a Story; and Defining Identity. The next stage was examining each girl's data more closely to see to get to know the data set better, and to do this I used mind maps, reviewed the coding, and created notes about significant topics. Next I asked myself "What do the data tell me? What have I learned about these girls from their photographs, narratives, and the similarities between their life experiences?"

There were six key ideas that seemed to answer these questions:

- Photographic Meaning/Intentions
- Items of Importance
- What's Missing from the Photographic Collections?

- Why Take a Photograph?
- Developing and Revealing Identity
- Exposing Elements without Meaning To

These themes helped me organize many central ideas the girls had shared about their photographic practice, their collections, and their experiences as teenagers and using these six key ideas I drafted a lengthy chapter to highlight what I felt were the findings of this research. In fact, what the key ideas did not do was emphasize the nexuses present in the data. The importance of the connections between the girls' experiences, the photographs and their identities was not strongly present in this early analysis. More analysis was needed to find and emphasize the relationships that existed between these themes, and also what big ideas these themes suggested.

I revisited the six themes above and paid careful attention to the areas where the girls' experiences, narrative and photographs overlapped, intertwined and showed commonalities.



Figure 2. Identifying potential nexuses ~ Sarah Bonsor Kurki

These areas pointed me towards many possible nexuses present for the girls (See Figure 2). With this newfound insight to the data I started to reorganize (and often rewrite) the findings chapter with a central emphasis on control, power, and the relationships between the girls' photographs, stories, and lives. This enabled me to narrow down three big ideas (or nexuses) that permeated through all the participants' data -- visual and oral:

Appearance, Media, and Self-Knowledge/Identity. At this point I also narrowed down my data set to focus on three participants: Amanda, Netra, and Sea, as their data provided very rich and detailed information that revealed a lot about their lives, their identities, and the experiences of adolescent girls.

In the final stages of analysis I drew heavily from critical feminism, and considered how the three nexuses were connected to feminism, control, societal norms,

and the experiences of these adolescent girls -- both visually in their photographic collections and in their oral stories. When writing Chapter 9 (Analysis & Discussion) I found I was unable to proceed in my usual way -- creating an outline based on notes and mind maps and then turning that into prose. Instead, after a few failed beginnings, I realized the easiest way for me to communicate my thoughts about the data and predominant themes was to speak them. In an embodied moment of feminist frustration while trying to capture the emotion I felt after realizing the harm being caused to young women because of the postfeminist rhetoric spread across all forms of social and mass media, I sat with my laptop on my lap and spoke out loud into the microphone of my computer. My word processing program turned my exasperated utterances into sentences and paragraphs on the page in front of me. I used my mind map as a guide along the pathways of tangled connections, ideas, and nexuses that had arisen during the initial analysis and matched them up with societal and global references, scholarly concepts, and vital examples that helped me discuss the issues facing the girls in my study and most likely many girls in our society.

Researcher Positionality

During this research process I found myself in numerous roles including academic, project manager, researcher, confidant, and photographer. At one point during the data collection period I realized my fortunate position of being both an insider with my participants, and an outsider when necessary. What I mean by this is that there were times when participants' photographs or stories that generated conversations in which I could draw on my own knowledge as a past adolescent girl, allowing me to strengthen the relationship I was building with the girls. As the girls

shared their stories, I too recalled events from my own experience that related to what they had told me about. It was for a few reasons that my own narratives became part of our conversations:

1) I did not want the girls to think of me as cold or uncaring, partially because I felt like they would not really open up and be neither honest nor deep when telling me about their photographs and their stories. Simply thanking them for their information and moving on to a new photograph seemed formal and made me feel like an invisible wall was placed between us. It was important that the girls felt as though I was truly interested in them, since I was, and my own sharing seemed to be one way to convey this.

2) By telling them about my own experiences I hoped they would come to know me as more than a university researcher -- as a person, a woman, who had experienced many similar events to the ones about which they told me from their own lives.

3) Humour is part of my personality and it was very difficult to not tell the girls about my own humorous life situations which related to their own.

4) Being unable to anticipate how these interviews would go, since I had originally planned group meetings, I knew I needed to build a trusting relationship with each participant. I wanted her to be genuine and honest about herself. I felt that if I wanted to get deep, thoughtful, and sincere responses to my questions the participants would have to trust me.

At other times my distance from being an adolescent girl provided useful, for instance when the girls asked for advice related to future schooling, their jobs, or other topics in which some adult life experience proved helpful. I was viewed by the

participants as someone with whom they could open up about themselves in seemingly genuine and honest ways, while at the same time they realized that I was knowledgeable about a variety of subjects to which they could relate, like attending university, dating, or traveling. The interview interactions allowed me to foster a relationship with the participants where discussions, stories and explanations flowed comfortably and confidentially between us. “Dialogue can arise from story-telling in a shared research space, and as Greene (1997b) writes, ‘out of dialogue and conjecture can come the making of projects also shared’” (Bach, 2007, p. 292).

Initially when I began preparing for this research I included intersectionality as a possible framework for not only sorting data but as part of the analysis process. After having collected the data, the aspects of identity that contribute to the concept of intersectionality were not prominent in the photographs or stories from the girls. Their ethnic backgrounds, socioeconomic status, sexuality, ability, did not emerge as key themes. The fact that the girls did not acknowledge these elements of themselves with much intensity perhaps makes them stand out more but I have left that for future study.

In asking the participants to self-select their photographs to contribute to the research I received photographs that had been selected because the girls felt they were important for me to see, and not their entire photographic collections. The potential for editing out “bad” photographs -- those that they felt were not genuinely reflective of their lives, or those that incriminated them in various possible situations that they preferred to keep secret -- existed and could have altered the findings of the research. In short, I saw what they wanted me to see, but given the multiple meanings found within photographic texts, I think I was able to see more than they thought I could.

Methodology and Research Design Summary

The intention of this chapter was to explain what occurred, how it happened, with whom, and why the research was conducted as it was. Firstly I discussed the ways in which the theoretical concepts of critical feminism and arts-based inquiry have informed this research in its development, practice, and analysis. Next, a detailed description of the recruitment process and brief biographies of the participants was provided. The methods involved in collecting the data and then analyzing it were explained in detail. Lastly, the positionality of the researcher was discussed. Armed with this contextual knowledge, I now invite the reader to delve deeply into the findings and initial analysis chapters that follow.

Chapter 4: Findings and Initial Analysis Introduction

Introducing the Nexuses

The Question: What are adolescent girls' photographic nexuses?

This research reveals the life experiences of adolescent girls through their photographs, photographic practice, stories, and shared ideas. It demonstrates a method of discovery that uses photographs taken by the participant as an entry point into the rich discussions, stories, and explanations about her life experiences. As previously stated in chapter 2, the theoretical ideas related to the use of nexus highlight my own and the participants' inquiries and interpretations of their photographs, stories, and life experiences that are immersed in our individual subjectivities. In addition to this theoretical underpinning, there is also the pragmatic use of the term nexus that is predominant in the findings section of this work. Nexus used in this fashion can be understood to have two meanings in reference to its use in organizing and analyzing this research: a nexus is the relationships and connections, and/or a coming together of elements in the participants' lived experiences, photographs, and selves; and a nexus as a focal point, centre or essence of the girls photographs, ideas and experiences. Nexuses help identify facets of adolescent life that the girls share with each other, key events occurring within their own experiences, as well as how their photography, stories and lives are connected and used (explicitly and implicitly) as they present themselves to the world. Initially I believed I would find the nexuses to be unique central features of each girl's life and identity, however some of the nexuses in one girl's life seem to be similar to those found in other girls' lives. The initial simplicity of the relationships between the girl, her life and her photographs that I thought would be revealed when I identified each

girl's nexuses does not exist and in fact, the further I delved into the data, the more complicated and connected the nexus concepts become.

Throughout the presentation of the findings it may be helpful to consider that the data being presented could be described by a number of visual metaphors. I initially imagined the data as looking into a bowl of spaghetti -- a tangled mess of strings and knots -- but this image did not take into account the key concepts each nexus represented, rather it just showed many criss-crossing relationships contained in the bowl. The messiness fit but there was something not quite right about this comparison. The nexus points vary in their intensity, their significance and/or their occurrence, so I kept searching for something that would enable these ideas to be included. I thought about images I had seen of the brain, with neurons splaying out dendrites that connect to other dendrites and neurons, passing information between them, creating a complex web of large and small connection points joined together by rows of cells, like little sausage links. However this image is a bit too scientific, technical, and tends to suggest rigid pathways, perhaps with messages flowing in only one direction. The directness of how information moves and the pre-set pathways of this metaphor seemed to be too unyielding for these data. The relationships, connections, and ideas that make up the participants' nexuses are more like stars making up constellations. The brightness and sizes of stars vary. They can be included in multiple groups to form constellations, depending on when and from where you are looking. They can follow formal, accepted patterns, like the Big Dipper/Ursa Major, however they also allow for the creation of one's own arrangements and personal designs to be made. Like the stars, the girls' nexuses occur with varying intensities, are discoverable at differing times, and depending on who is interpreting the

photographs, stories and explanations that the girls provided, the nexuses may be understood differently from one person to the next.

The nexuses presented in the findings chapters have been selected out of many possible nexuses that arose from the data. The examples used to explain these nexuses come mainly from three of the eight participants, as explained earlier Chapter 3: Methodology & Methods. Although presented in a somewhat linear fashion, given the format of a written document, the intent is to show a complicated and messy tangle of links and relational meanings with one another but in a readable way. At times for one girl, a nexus may not have been part of her life experience and then later in another story or photograph it will have taken centre stage. As the girls' photographs and stories were shared nexuses took on additional meanings as they were found to be common to multiple participants' data, which is one reason why some photographs are included more than once. So I ask as you read to keep an open mind, as you look deeply into these complicated data that *I* have interpreted, because *your own* interpretations and meaning making will allow new connections between nexuses, lived experience and photographs to be made. The girls' lives are muddled, complicated, and filled with their own ongoing meaning making and it is for these reasons that what follows will be complex too.

This introduction to the findings and initial analysis begins by presenting control as the central nexus to which all the participants were connected. The nexuses of appearance and identity are introduced as significant interwoven themes occurring throughout the data. How two mechanisms that were present in the girls' lives -- cameras and social media -- support the nexuses is demonstrated next. As the concepts arising from the data become more entwined, the following three chapters take a deeper look at how the social media nexus, the appearance nexus, and the identity nexus reveal the

ongoing development and maturity of the girls, their photographic practice, and its relationship to their life experiences.

The Central Nexus: Control

Control was constant in the participants' lives. How they saw themselves, engaged with other people and their environment were all influenced by control -- having control, wanting control, being in control, losing control, and being controlled. Although sometimes used interchangeably with the concept of power, control and power do have some subtle differences in their meanings. Control is defined ("Control", Oxford Online Dictionary, 2016) as

- To influence or direct people's behaviour.
- To restrict.
- A means of limiting or regulating something

These meanings are often about *preventing or leading something*, such as behaviour, a person, or a way of thinking for instance. Control can be direct and indirect, external and internal. It can come from one source or many. For the participants, control frequently came from external messages and rules that were imposed upon them and that impacted how they engaged with the world.

The definitions of power are more about *action taken* by someone or something in many definitions, for instance ("Power", Oxford Online Dictionary, 2016)

- Ability or capacity to do something or act in a particular way;
- Capacity to direct or influence.
- Direct with great force.

Power suggests action and ability by someone or something but it does not have to be action that is connected to limiting, restraining, or shaping something like control.

Control centres on enforcing or dominating something or someone. Power and control can be difficult to separate. For instance, power can be (the power of persuasion perhaps) to exert control over someone. For many of the participants control was something they felt they lacked, something that was put upon them, and usually involved topics about which they had little or no voice. Through their use of cameras and related tools (digital social media for example) the girls tried to exert control over how others came to know them.

In many ways these girls were controlled; by parents/family, societal norms, media messages, school, work and so on. In some aspects of their lives they felt helpless to these controlling elements -- they could not stop a divorce, change images in magazines or create new rules for curfew for instance. Perhaps in response to their controlled existence they found places where they were able exert control over their lives -- through altering their appearance, selecting language, maintaining a strong performance in school or at work; all the while still being controlled in the choices they made in relation to these activities. How they chose to look by exercising power over their appearance was controlled -- although some of them did not admit to being influenced: by the media, by parental guidelines, by peers and/or societal modelling. How they performed at school was influenced/controlled by the messages their peers, parents, and outside factors directed them -- good grades meant university acceptance for instance. There was a push and pull between being controlled and being in control for these girls that was just as complex as the stories and photographs they shared.

Additional Nexuses

In addition to control the data showed other nexuses were present: Appearance; Family; Peers; Diversions; Identity; Social Media Influence; Pressures; and Language. As control is interwoven throughout the participants' life experiences -- so too are these nexuses -- interwoven with control as well as each other. (Although seemingly simply introduced, and independent from one another, the data demonstrates many connections between these nexuses.) For the purposes of this research, the nexuses of **appearance** and **identity** will be the foci, however the significant impact that media -- specifically **social media** -- had on the girls' photographic practices, appearances, and identities cannot be ignored so this nexus support mechanism will also be discussed. Given the complicated nature of teenagers, woven throughout the data are implicit references to the other nexuses, suggesting the complex ways in which the data present multiple nexuses stemming from a single photograph or experience and expanding to an entire photographic collection or girl's identity concept.

- The **social media nexus** brings together the girls' photographs, their photographic practices, and their varied uses of photographs to demonstrate how social media supports their ongoing maturation and at the same time creates tension, confusion, and/or limitations for the girls. This nexus also includes a section on selfies that connects strongly to both the appearance and identity nexuses.
- The **appearance nexus** contains fleeting moments and ongoing struggles, personal opinions and societal norms, and goals and wishes all related to the girls' appearance; including their thoughts about *What do they look like? Is what they look like "good enough"? What should/could they look*

like? as well as my own interpretation of their stories, photographs and externally-influenced ideas and behaviours.

- Explaining identity is a difficult task and the **identity nexus** recounts narratives that offer a window into the girls' identities, their developing self-knowledge as they progress through adolescence, and as they view and review their photographic collections as part of this research.

For some of the girls' data, some of these connection points occur more often or are shown to be more significant than others. I have identified relationships where I see them occurring -- where the girls' photographs and stories draw attention to them and where my own background (academic and otherwise) provides me a schema that I can use to identify the nexuses -- however these are not the only ways the participants' data can be linked, compared, contrasted, and considered. By offering additional nexuses at the outset I want to provide the reader with possibilities to wonder about, rather than bestow labels that may limit interpretation.

Mechanisms Supporting Nexuses

Cameras and Photographic Practice

Photography was embedded within the girls' lives and their photographic practice were meaningful, to them, their families and other people with whom they shared their images. Their photography revealed ways in which they engaged with their world, how they thought about themselves, and provided a window into how those two areas of experience interconnect. Therefore, it is necessary to examine not only the content of the participants' photographs but also their photographic practice (including purposes/motivation for making photographs, and the tools involved: cameras, smart

phones, software, apps, etc.) that contribute/allow for the nexuses to exist as well as the limitations that arise from these tools. Photography acts as a vehicle for the girls' memories, participation in various communities, and outlet for their imaginations. Their photographic habits provide the capacity for them to document, express and maintain ideas about themselves, others, and their experiences. These elements will be explored further in the upcoming nexuses chapters.

Social Media

Social media is a contributing foundational ingredient of their other key nexuses -- appearance and identity -- and for this reason it can be understood as a mechanism supporting the many other nexuses existing in the data. Social media as a nexus will be expanded upon in the next chapter. The interview data indicates that the participants' photography significantly provided material for them to engage in social media as producers and consumers -- as prosumers (Tapscott & Williams, 2006). Photography was essential in their lives as part of their contribution to social media (and society in general) as prosumers, because it was an outlet of creativity and response to their life experiences. Social media provided space in which the girls learned about social norms, experimented with their identities, and curated images of their appearance. Like the mechanism of photography, social media also provided a place where the girls were able to connect with people of like-mindedness and feel a sense of belonging using their visual texts as a mode of communication to others, and to express and explore ideas about themselves.

Findings and Initial Analysis Introduction Summary

The relationships and connections that exist between the girls' lives, photographs, and selves can be identified as nexuses of who they are. The primary nexus of control permeates nearly all aspects of their experiences. The appearance and identity nexuses are also predominant areas where their photographs and life experiences come together where they experiment and shape their identities. The participants' photographic practices and their engagement with social media provide the essential mechanisms for them to learn, connect, and explore themselves and the world around them.

Chapter 5: The Social Media Nexus

Introduction

Acknowledging that social media is in constant change, both through the ongoing release of new applications and because of variations of user-generated methods of engagement, it is still necessary to broadly define it as well as determine how it differs from mass media and how social networking sites (SNS) are contained within it. Whereas mass media is primarily produced by professional companies to provide information about world events or commercial products, social media is driven by “User Generated Content” (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010) wherein the users can be anyone with internet access creating content they want to share, in various forms: text, photographs, videos, audio, etc. Mass and social media both have the power to teach, to advise about how to live certain ways, to direct how to think about what is going on in the world, to entertain, and both carry the power to influence life decisions. Their messages can be supportive or damaging. For adolescents who are in the process of self-discovery and identity formation and who are trying to figure out how they fit into the world, this can be especially perplexing or disheartening. And, as Amanda pointed out, often media’s messages are untrue. *“I think that the stereotype is that we only take pictures of selfies and Starbucks and stuff like that, that’s what I think anyway.”* However, Erin’s photograph of her friend’s cup (Figure 3) perhaps suggests otherwise. In attempting to portray a certain lifestyle social media can aid youth in communicating to their peers, and the world, that they have attended key events or have objects that help them fit in.



Figure 3. Photograph 189 ~ Erin

Although written in 2007, this statement by Lankshear and Knobel about developments to how we communicate still holds true today.

A distinctive feature of today's literacy scene is the extent to which, and the pace with which, new socially recognized ways of pursuing familiar and novel tasks by means of exchanging and negotiating meanings via encoded artefacts are emerging and being refined. (p. 224)

These "*new socially recognized ways of*" communicating about which they reference effectively describes how social media has become ubiquitous for many youth. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) state, "Social Media is a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the

creation and exchange of User Generated Content,” (p. 61) and for the purposes of this research I want to clarify which social media applications were used and for what reasons. Central to Web 2.0 is the collaboration and an emphasis on “the new ethos of participatory culture” (Jenkins, 2010, p. 236).

Participants in new literacy practices [including social media engagement] actively seek out memberships and peers in areas of affinity and interest, and pursue different kinds of relationships between “authors” and “audiences” from those characterizing many conventional literacy practices. (Knobel & Lankshear, 2014, p.98)

Social media includes numerous kinds of applications including three with which my participants engaged: social networking sites (SNS), blogs, and content communities (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Social networking sites

are applications that enable users to connect by creating personal information profiles, inviting friends and colleagues to have access to those profiles, and sending e-mails and instant messages between each other. (p. 63)

The SNS that the participants used were Facebook and Snapchat. Blogs were only mentioned by one participant, Sea, who used them as a source of artistic inspiration. Clark (2009) argues that “blogs were the first modern form of social media” and “involve the production of content that is an alternative to traditional media AND that benefits from interlinked conversation and comments” (n.p.). Blogs tend to contain theme-related content that is produced by and/or gathered by the blogger and about which viewers of the blog can comment. The third form of social media the participants used was content communities, defined as an online space that encourages “the sharing of media content between users” (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p. 63). The content communities used by the

participants were YouTube, Instagram, and Tumblr although the social networking aspects to these sites has grown as they have evolved and thus could be seen to straddle between these two areas of social media. The girls' purposes for engagement with social media seemed to fall into two areas: sharing about themselves (to give out information) as producers of multimodal messages and learning or being entertained by them (to take in information) as consumers of multimodal messages. It is important to note that each of the above mentioned social media applications offers its users abilities which can support and limit its users at the same time, depending on how the site is used and how the user interprets the messages found there. For instance, Sea found Instagram to be an effective tool to curate images of herself, however knowing that her parents also used Instagram might have limited what she chose to post to the site.

This chapter will identify the ways in which the participants engaged with and were affected by social media: to connect with community; to learn social norms; and to experiment with and create identity. In addition, the girls' participation and thoughts on the social phenomenon of selfies and how they relate to other predominant nexuses will also be presented.

Social Media: Connect with Community

Social interactions were central to the participants' lives and they used their photographs as a way to be socially involved. The girls spoke about various social media like Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr, blogs etc. and this suggests their awareness of and experience with them was commonplace. Regardless of their use with each site in particular they seemed to know the function each of the sites afforded its users.

Highly important to Netra was how her make-up looked. She spent a significant amount of time daily ensuring her eye shadow was blended evenly and her eyeliner was not smudged. Netra stated that her efforts were just for her, and the great amount of attention she paid to her appearance is expanded upon in the appearance chapter, however additional statements revealed that she found acknowledgement from her peers was rewarding. She spoke about how her friends noticed her daily practice while responding to photograph 118 (Figure 4).

Netra ~ I guess sometimes I try to take pictures of my eyes more frequently and people are like “You should put your eyes on Instagram” but I don’t have a phone so I can’t Instagram.



Figure 4. Photograph 118 ~ Netra

Her friend's compliment was significant to Netra because it reinforced her idea that looking a certain way brought positive attention. Netra mentioned in another conversation she wanted to be noticed for her appearance and talked about having to have something about her appearance that "*popped*". Instagram would have been an effective place for Netra to receive feedback and associate with other people who shared her enjoyment of make-up application. Despite not having access to Instagram directly, Netra was still familiar with one of its primary uses: to share photographs and connect with people of similar interests, in her case make-up.

Amanda and Sea also went to social media as a way to connect with people by sharing their photography and found it to be a source of inspiration. Photograph 29 (Figure 5) was taken with certain ideas in mind to which Amanda had been exposed on Instagram.

Amanda ~ *This one's on the beach again. I think this was probably inspired by a picture I've seen on Instagram or something. There are people that take pictures like that. I liked how the sign looked -- kind of old and scratched up. It reminded me of books that I read. I just wanted it to be -- my goal was to make the sign clear but the back blurry but you could still see what it was.*

Amanda referred to "*people who take pictures like that*" which suggests that she was familiar with and influenced by the photographs she had viewed on social media sites (like Instagram, Flickr, Tumblr). On Tumblr Sea recalled seeing how other people had used Photoshop and created her own image inspired by theirs for a class project in photograph 142 (Figure 6).



Figure 5. Photograph 29 ~ Amanda



Figure 6. Photograph 142 ~ Sea (photograph edited by participant)

Sea ~ I had seen stuff like that before on the Internet so I thought it was kind of funny and wanted to do something like that. And I saw on Tumblr something like the cool design -- instead of someone's skin and you just have a picture of a girl or something and just crop out where her skin is and put a cool design...that was a picture from last summer when I went to -- that was at the Grand Tetons, so that was cool. I thought it'd look good with that picture.

Finding inspiration and connecting with community were key motivators for the girls to engage with social media. They found creative ideas and applied them to their own artistic practice.

Social Media: Learn Social Norms

Being part of a community is often based on a shared interest, as seen above. The like-mindedness of community members can serve as expert-knowledge and when someone is looking to learn more about the shared interest, social media communities offer an easily accessible, albeit unconfirmed resource. Along with internal confusion based on what those around them might have said or have been thinking about their appearance, the girls also revealed that they held very embedded ideas from society's norms -- although they did not always seem to understand why they felt things should have been the way they were. This section brings forth the ways in which the girls accepted and complied with certain standards and assumed particular looks so as to best fit in with the ways they thought they were supposed to be appearing. With young women in all forms of media being presented as pore-less, painted, pure, and petite it is no wonder that each of these participants engaged in an internal mediation between wanting to be unique and true to herself and feeling a strong urge to fit in to the cultural stereotypes surrounding them. Netra and Amanda found social media helped them gather information about the topics of interest to them and then acted upon what they had learned.

Netra used social media as a way to learn about techniques and designs for applying her eye make-up. Encouraged by her sister, she looked to photographs and videos on Facebook and YouTube.

Netra ~ I know a lot of girls -- when I go on Facebook and my sister is like "Oh look! This girl did something that you would do!" and there's pictures of closed eyelids and open eyelids and they are showing you how and what colors and the

eye designs and I'm just like "Wow!" I wish I could do that and then I try to do that and it doesn't always turn out.

+++

~ I do go on YouTube. I did this one [watched a video] to show me how to do... it was like these really sparkly midnight beautiful eyes -- like the party ones. That's where I get my ideas for party -- like "Sparkle it up and put eyeliner on!"

Beyond simply observing the girls' eye make-up tutorials and photographs, Netra stated that she did try out their suggestions. Perhaps seemingly innocent, Netra's adoption of how she should prepare herself for "party" looks speaks to a normative practice in society in which she has accepted and engaged. In the Appearance nexus chapter, her dependence on wearing make-up and her application routine are expanded upon further.

Similarly, Amanda used social media to learn and then act on her findings.

Amanda explained how she came to see Tumblr as a resource for initially wanting to find out how to lose weight and how that turned into a realization that her ideas about her body resembled those of people with eating disorders.

Amanda *~ I went on Tumblr to look -- because last time I lost weight because I was being more healthy and stuff. I looked on there because there was lots of healthy people and being all inspired and stuff so I looked on there and I just came across ALL these people that have really bad eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia. Seeing they way they thought -- it freaked me out but I kept going back and looking at more cause -- I don't know -- it was interesting almost but then I kind of like got the same thoughts as them and was thinking more like they were instead of more of like the healthy people. And I've never -- I've never gone through what they, like most of them have, because theirs [eating disorders] are*

really extreme but I was still thinking basically the same way and it was kind of getting to a point where I was starting to fall into bad habits.

Amanda started using Tumblr to find out how to be healthy and to lose weight. Housing many examples for her to consult, Tumblr functioned as an effective teaching tool, however because there were so many examples -- and they were unchecked (anyone can post just about anything to Tumblr) -- this teaching resource was also a dangerous place. The frequency of images and messages posted by those with eating disorders may have created a false sense of accuracy around what it means to look healthy or which behaviours are acceptable (by Amanda and/or society) to adopt to change your body.

Tumblr's messages about body image also influenced Amanda's photography. Photograph 136 (Figure 7) was created by Amanda as part of a photographic essay assignment for her Photography 12 course at school. The subject of her essay was eating disorders. She used her own idea for the top image and borrowed the concept in the bottom image from a post she had viewed on Tumblr to create this part of the essay. The myriad meanings that can be interpreted in these photographs make it difficult to know exactly how Amanda intended them to be understood -- were they representative of her own experience or was she trying to communicate the ideas that other people held about eating disorders? The emphasis on the tape measure in both images may be significant as it is a tool commonly used by people trying to lose weight.

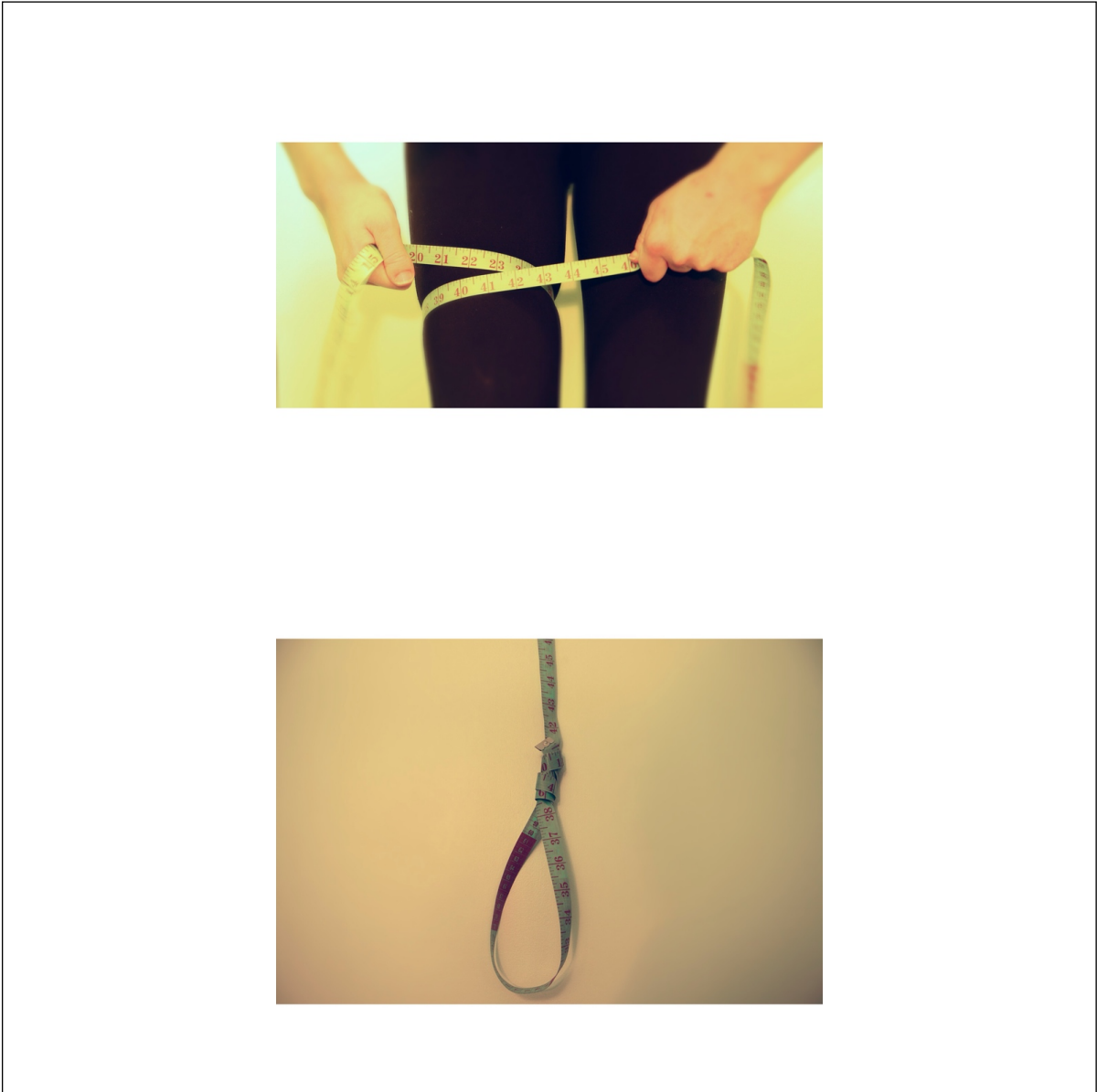


Figure 7. Photograph 136 ~ Amanda

Learn Social Norms: Measure Up/Fit In

In addition to learning how society expected them to behave, look, and think when they engaged with social media, the participants also found it provided a place for them to compare themselves to their peers and those in their age group to see how well they measured up and/or fit in to how they were supposed to be, especially when it came to

their appearance. Netra and Sea's photographs below, coupled with their stories, demonstrate their feelings of expectation. The girls seemed to be influenced by prevailing expectations of how they were supposed to look. These images show examples of them trying to fit into the norms that they had (somewhat unknowingly) adopted while at the same time being aware that they wanted to be unique and noticed -- stand out.

Netra's comments above about using Instagram and YouTube as ways to learn her make-up application skills also referred to the opportunity for her to try to liken herself to what she saw. Her sister's explicit statement "*Oh look! This girl did something that you would do!*" highlights both recognition of Netra's skillset and the act of comparison, so common for teenagers. Netra's make-up application resembled what her sister had observed on Facebook and her comment provided acknowledgement that Netra fit in or was "doing it right". Her make-up routine had become so ingrained in her life that it had altered how she thought about herself.

Netra ~ You get really used to it... Yeah, it's because my eyeliner it really defines my eyes... it's just I don't imagine myself with brown lids.

Not only did Netra expect to see herself look a certain way, this way became the norm for her. It is probably because as she states "*You get really used to it*" but also because so many women in the media also appear with coloured lids and heavily lined eyes. This standard for how eyes could look became central to how Netra believed she should look, and was part of her customary outward performance of "Netra".

Social media also provided Sea a place to see how she fit in, specifically using Instagram to collect and refer back to fashion options.

Sea ~ When I go shopping if I find an outfit that I like but I don't buy it then I Instagram that... it's kind of like a cute little way to share stuff and then I can just remember that outfit.

Sea's striped dress shown in photograph 217 (Figure 8) was a style she had seen and liked on other people. She was unsure of the outcome because it did not look “*the same*” on her as it did on the others.

Sea ~ When you see other people wearing something and they look really good in it and you want it because you are like, “Wow! That looks really good!” It either won't look good on you because you have a different body shape or just it's not your style and you wouldn't really feel super comfortable wearing it. So it's kind of the struggle between seeing something and thinking it looks really good and wanting that but also realizing it's not going to look the same on me.

Sea's concern about a dress “*not looking good on you*” because of your body shape suggests that her understanding of “*looking good*” came from what the people around her were wearing, and probably from the media. The idea that a body is a certain shape and that shaped body should or should not be clothed in certain ways is a cultural norm that Sea has adopted, seemingly without realizing its influence over her. Sea chose to photograph herself in the dress and take time to decide if she should buy it. This pause between trying the dress and buying it could have been a way for her to check in to see how she measured up to the models of how she thought the dress was supposed to look, reiterating the fact that Sea felt looking a certain way in a certain kind of outfit was necessary before making a purchase.



Figure 8. Photograph 217 ~ Sea

Instagram functioned as a memory device for Sea, as a way to communicate with others about clothing she liked, and place of comparison. The feedback from other Instagram users Sea would have received about her images could have influenced how she felt about the outfit she was modelling. Viewing images of herself as a collection in Instagram also allowed for ease of self-assessment.

Like Netra and Sea, in social media Amanda found a place to learn, to see how she measured up to other people, to find those who held similar ideas as her, and to find those from whom she differed. Tumblr's many visual posts became a scale for her to use to evaluate her own body, behaviour, and thinking about her appearance. She could look at herself and literally measure how she compared to other people in the photographs she was viewing, as shown above in photograph 136 (Figure 7). When Amanda said, "*theirs are really extreme*" (see quotation on page 83-84) it suggests that she was creating a distance between herself and the people posting on Tumblr. Their experiences may have helped Amanda draw a line that she felt she had not crossed and did not want to cross in relation to her own body issues and behaviours. That being said she did express some unease about how her own thoughts were the same as theirs some of the time and this confusion perhaps was what lead her to realize she was "*starting to fall into bad habits.*" Finding people with whom she identified was in some way probably a comfort for Amanda. It may have helped her feel a sense of normality -- with so many people modelling how they detested their bodies and were trying to change them she may have thought she was doing the right thing. Also, finding people on Tumblr with very serious healthy conditions related to their disordered eating may have made Amanda feel somewhat reassured and in control -- knowing she was not like them and that she would not become like them. "*I hate thinking like that. I don't think like that.*" In essence, Tumblr gave Amanda permission to try and change her body because what she found there was more comforting than unsettling. The messages and images reaffirmed the control she felt over the situation she was in -- confusion about her body image. She used this part of social media to measure her own reactions, thoughts, and behaviours against the ones she saw online to decide where and how she fit in.

Social Media: Resisting

Despite wanting to be seen in a certain way the participants did not always find social media as satisfying places to cultivate their image or identity. Amanda told me that she rarely posted her photographs on Facebook, choosing to put them on Instagram instead. Her reluctance to share her photography with family and friends through Facebook posts was not explained. It is possible that her shyness prevented her from wanting to share too much about her life with the friends (or more likely acquaintances) she had on the site. Instagram provides a lot more anonymity than Facebook, which might make Amanda feel better about posting her photography there. There is less chance that she would have to engage in real life (not online) with people with whom she was familiar about her images and experiences than if she used Facebook to show off her photographs.

Sea shared Amanda's dislike for Facebook. She talked about a conscious effort to change her behaviour around her computer use and explained why Facebook in particular was causing her to feel frustrated and also to question its purpose in her life.

Sea ~ I've been trying not to go on the computer as much. I deleted my Facebook because I felt like it was useless... I just feel like I've been trapped kind of because Facebook -- a lot of it is kind of trying to appear a certain way and trying to -- I don't know, for older people it would probably be different; like parents and people who haven't grown up since they were 12 with it. But it's just been such a regular thing with this generation. I think everybody goes on it and checks it at least once a day and then they don't really do any conversations, like some people do, but for the most part I find that it's just posting pictures and trying to appear a

certain way and creeping other people and judging them. It was just kind of putting a weight on me.

Sea's aversion to Facebook seemed to stem from its ubiquitousness in her (and her generation's) life and the way in which her peers used it as a way to both create an image that may not represent them accurately (as she knew them outside of the online world) and to judge others about how they have presented their lives. Given that adolescence is a time for identity development and experimentation it makes sense that youth would want to try and create an identity that fits how they want to be seen. Presenting their identity a certain way also affords a sense of control during a time when they are often controlled by others (e.g. parents and/or teachers). One difficulty Sea had with Facebook was that it was ever present in her life, so any mistakes or changes to the image she wanted to put forth could be tracked, remembered, and held on to, in potentially damaging ways.

Sea ~ I find a lot of my friends that I told [about deleting her account] -- they are kind of like "Oh yeah, I get it. I get why you would delete it." ... It's kind of -- it's sad because Facebook is pretty cool because you can share anything at any time basically but at the same time it feels like it's a little too convenient and people take advantage of it. It's become really narcissistic I find.

Sea's act of deletion was met with approval from her peers, however it appeared she was feeling slightly disappointed about doing it because Facebook did allow her to connect with them about "anything at any time" but the issue she raised was that her peers were not connecting with her. Instead their narcissism and lack of conversations that Sea mentioned earlier suggest that rather than being an online space in which to engage with others, she saw her peers using Facebook as a place to show off how well they fit in to society's norms.

Sea continued to explain that the way she experienced and thought about events had changed because of the way in which Facebook took her out of the moment and/or provided her an excuse to pay less attention because she could always go back to it later.

Sea ~ I find that when I hang out with certain friends they kind of -- it's always on. They are always -- if something happens they are really quick to go to Facebook and share something and it kind of doesn't feel as special... I find that it makes the memories less memorable because you are kind of tucking it away on this Facebook status and you are not going to remember it because you weren't really present... in the back of your mind are thinking "Well it's there so if I ever look back I'll probably see that and remember it"... I think that's the problem because it just feels like people are so dependent on it to use it as a timeline and they even use that on Facebook as a term -- a timeline. But I think it takes away a lot from experiences and I don't feel as present when I know that it's available.

Feeling connected to other people, including being present for them was something Sea had expressed was significant to how she wanted to experience life. Being dependent on Facebook to hold memories for her was disappointing for Sea and reduced her enjoyment of events knowing that her peers were so quick to share instead of taking in the experience. The quick sharing and also the content of what was shared allowed Sea and her peers another opportunity to construct their identities; where you went and what you saw, and with whom makes a statement about the kind of life you live (or want people to think you live). This potentially deceptive, or less accurate perception of someone was very bothersome for Sea.

Social Media: Selfies

Absent from the above discussion of the girls' engagement with social media is their own visual presence in it. What they looked like and how they chose to portray themselves in photographs (which were often but not always posted to social media) was a significant way in which they wanted to exert control over their identities. Their photographs posted on social media demonstrated their attempts to blend in with or stand out from the crowd -- depending on which participant's images were being viewed. A critical aspect of the way in which social media use contributed to how the girls' identities were being constructed was the creation, editing, and sharing of selfies (Figure 9).

Selfie – a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website (“Selfie”, Online Oxford Dictionary, 2015)

There are a variety of reasons to take a selfie, for example, for entertainment when spending time with friends, as a mirror to see how one looked in that moment, to remember an event or place, to show off something (item of clothing or accessory for instance), to share one's appearance with others, and more. All these reasons for taking photographs did exist before the selfie phenomenon, however Amanda provides a bit of insight as to why selfies have become popular among her friends.

Amanda ~ *We have a photo share thing, cause iPhones can do that now so we have one and if we take pictures together we all put the ones on our phones into that so we can all see them but don't have to individually send them to each other so that's way faster. I like that.*

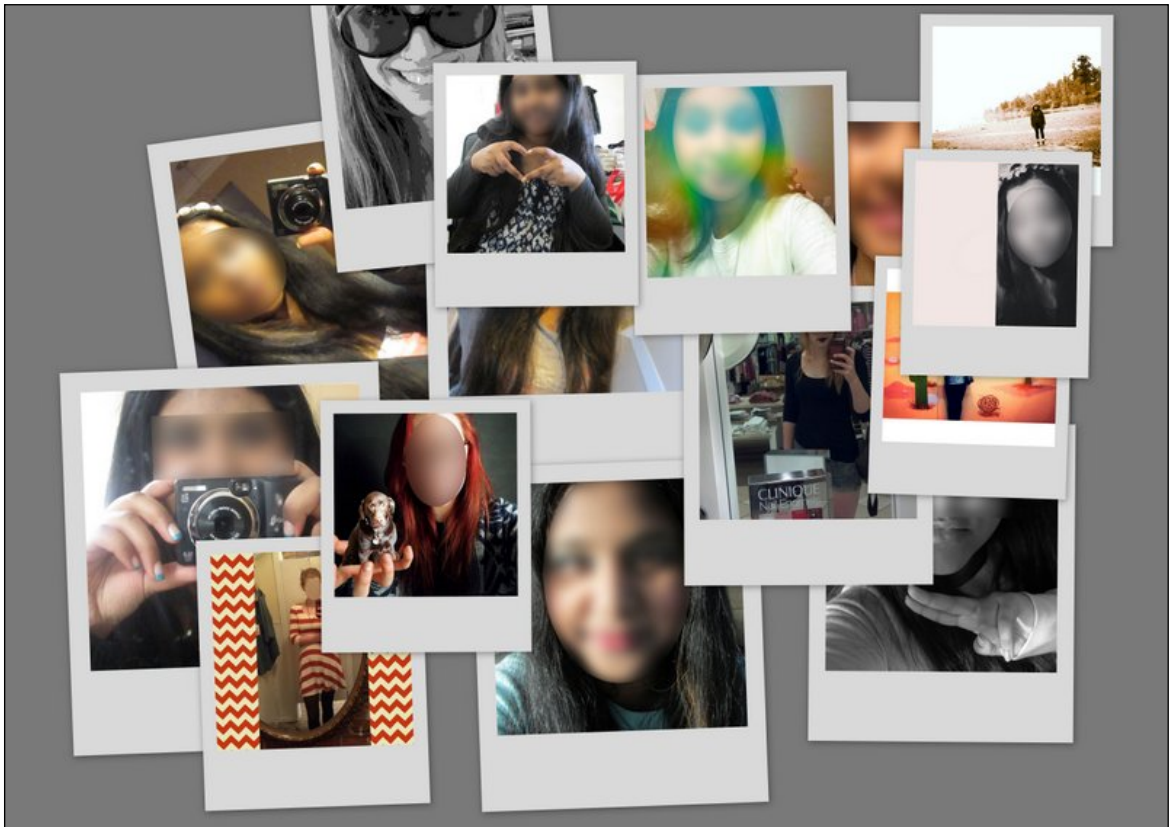


Figure 9. Collage of participants' selfies

Instant sharing of moments captured with their camera phones can enhance the enjoyment of spending time with friends as well as documenting experiences for them to return to later.

Although defined by a formal resource above (The Oxford Dictionary) there are discrepancies between the participants' use of the word and this definition. Not all selfies are necessarily uploaded to social media (as Sea explained below) and the act of photographing oneself for any of the above reasons could suggest that it is a selfie, as Netra explained: *"Selfies, like you are taking a picture of your self...self, self photo."* Selfies provided a means of participating in social media and as a way to aid in the construction of identities. They afforded the girls a way to take some control over their

lives. Selfies can also be used as a way to show how adolescents meet the social criteria (societal norms) that has been set for them -- blending in by showing visual evidence that they have attained what is expected and/or standing out for reasons that are hopefully positively received -- for example getting a new haircut or the latest pair of fashionable boots. The participants included selfies in their photographic collections. They spoke about them and also about the ones that were not sent in, that were deleted, and/or the ones that were kept for their viewing only.

Selfies: Selfies Cause Emotional Reactions

It is fair to say that most people would not want to make public a photograph in which they looked unbecoming and the participants' experiences with taking selfies on their own and those taken with friends echo this sentiment. Since one's appearance is so significant during adolescence it does not seem surprising that the photographs the girls shared of themselves were often the best one or two of many -- selected to show them looking a particular way -- that they approved of. The discussions about selfies often included how their images made them feel: weird, embarrassed, vulnerable, or good. Netra described her experience making photograph 72 (Figure 10).

Netra ~ *I think I took three, no wait. Three shots came out good. How many did I take? I tried to do my -- you know, my face, but you couldn't see the eyes clearly. Well you could see them, you just couldn't SEE see them.*

Obviously the blurring of this image to protect her privacy disguises the make-up application Netra was highlighting in this photograph but her numerous attempts to show off her eyes speaks to a desire to make sure she had a final product (selfie) that she liked



Figure 10. Photograph 72 ~ Netra

and that she felt comfortable sharing. Like Netra, Amanda expressed that she would only want to share images of herself that she liked.

Amanda ~ *Like especially number 9 [Figure 11], if I'm taking a picture where you can really see my face -- I don't like it when people take my picture because a lot of times it takes a long time to get one that I actually like and sometimes I get - - like when I was taking that one [Figure 12 -- photograph 48] -- one that was really bad and it just made me laugh... I'd rather people see the good one, instead of having to do it a million times.*

Amanda wanting people to “*see the good one*” reiterates Netra’s acknowledging that in her process of making photograph 72 (Figure 10) “*three shots came out good.*” This suggests the girls had a set of criteria with which they used to select photographs that they might share with others. It also implies that how other people viewed them was a significant and deciding factor in which images they would make public and which they

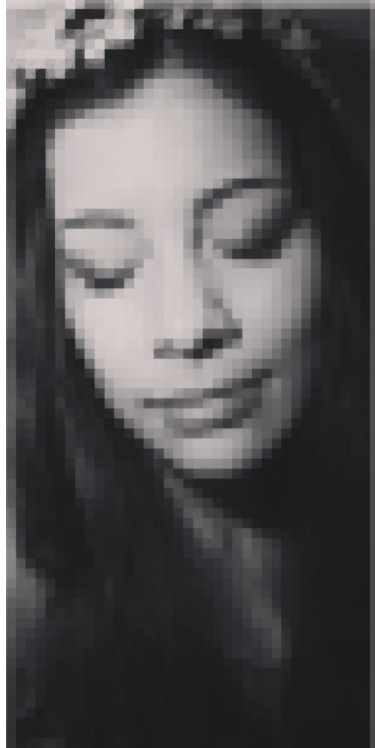


Figure 11. Photograph 9 ~ Amanda

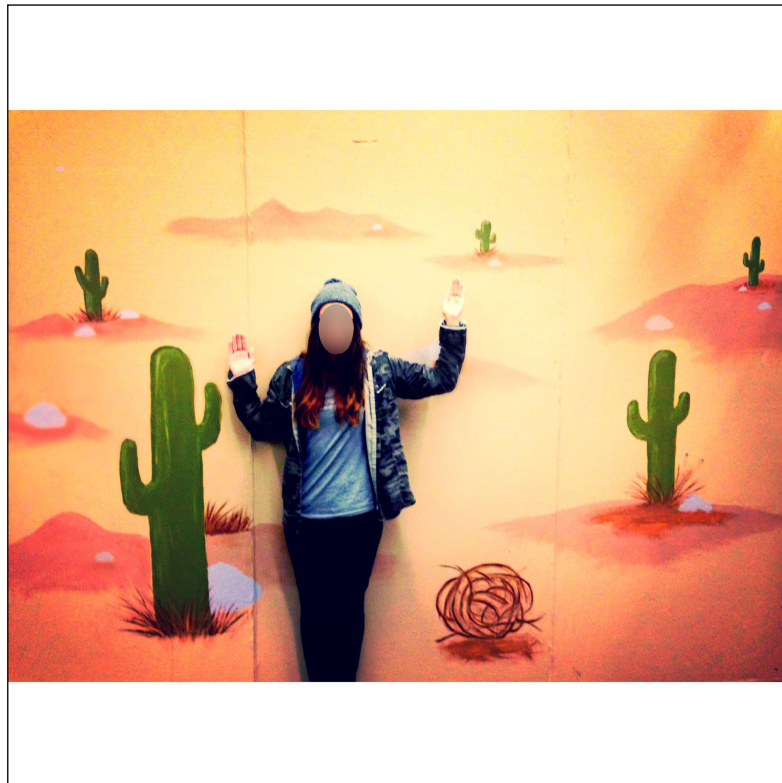


Figure 12. Photograph 48 ~ Amanda

would keep private or delete. Amanda further explained that certain photographs of her would make her feel uncomfortable or “weird” if she were to have put them in a public space.

Amanda ~ *I don't have a problem sharing selfies where I'm really far away like that fourth one [Figure 13 -- photograph 13] but if I took a picture like that [Figure 14 --Netra's photograph 33] I'd be much more uncomfortable showing everyone... it might not really suit my personality. I don't actually really take pictures like that so if I did and shared it, it would be kind of weird for me but also I just, I'm not sure, I'd just feel weird.*



Figure 13. Photograph 13 ~ Amanda

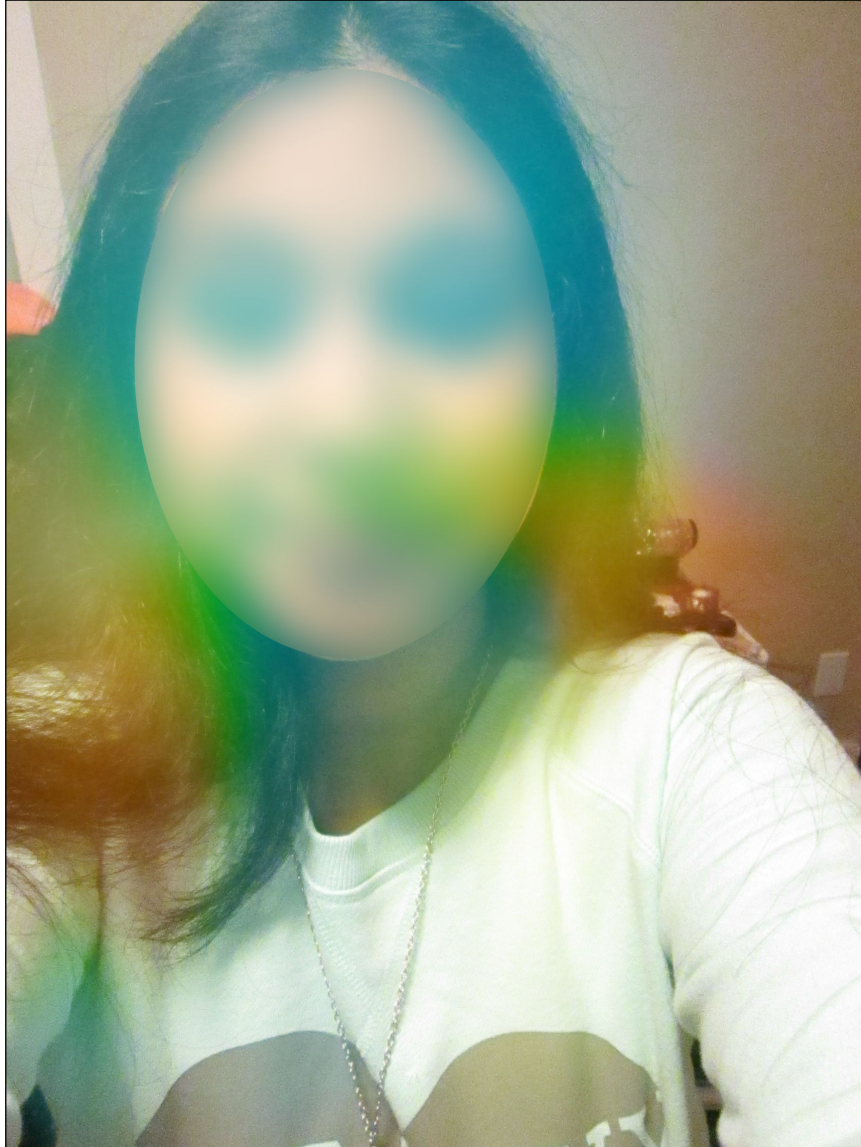


Figure 14. Photograph 33 ~ Netra

The girls' reactions to their photographs caused them to take action depending on how they were feeling. If they liked their image, they might have posted it to Facebook, like Netra did. If they disliked it, it was probably deleted. Sea's experience with selfies of her and her friends suggests deleting photographs was a common practice.

Sea ~ Because a lot of times they [Sea's friends] always think that they look bad in pictures so when you take them and you're like "OMG! Such a cute picture!"... they are like "Oh! I look ugly!" So they delete it. Or they want you to delete it so

you have to... Most times, unless you are specifically like “I am not going to put this anywhere, I’ll hide it -- just for me.” But even then, a lot of time they want you to delete it.

As Sea stated, she was often made to delete photographs because her friends disliked what they saw, regardless of what Sea thought of the image, because the potential threat of them being shared on social media was too great. Her friends’ constant disapproval of their own appearance suggests that liking their own photograph was not a common practice, unless it captured their likeness exactly as they wanted it to. Sea did admit to keeping some photographs private though, ones she was embarrassed by, which were taken for the purpose of seeing how she looked at a certain time.

Sea ~ There’s some selfies -- just to see what I looked like that day -- and you don’t really want to show people selfies because they are embarrassing sometimes... I feel like it’s kind of vulnerable because you are trying to see what you look like at a certain angle or something and then if somebody saw that through your phone, they’d be like “What the heck? Why’d you take that picture?”

Again the feeling Sea got when looking at her photographs, and the potential for others to question her motives about her images, were factors in when and why she would take and share selfies. It seems that peer feedback impacted how the girls felt about their own images and their feelings influenced what they did with their photographs.

Selfies: Control and Selfies

Having a photograph of someone else seemed to provide power over them because the friend with the image could do whatever they wanted with it, including share it on social media. Asking people not to post photographs or not to be identified (tagged)

in them were ways that Sea's friends tried to avoid having photographs of them circulated.

Sea ~ I've been kind of bad in the past with not respecting that and posting it anyways and then they get mad, but it's like you kind of have to respect if they don't like the picture. People like taking pictures of themselves a lot because they do a certain thing that they know looks good in a picture so they do that every time... I think that's why selfies are popular because they get to control when the picture is taken exactly, and do a certain face that they always do, at a certain angle because it makes your chin look smaller when you do it up here [gestures so she is looking up at the camera] and stuff.

Controlling where your photographs end up as well as how you look in them appeared to be important to Sea's friends, as well as a number of the other participants (see Amanda's quotation below). Trust and power are strongly connected to friendship and the opportunity to have those become unbalanced because of how photographs were being used created tension for Sea and some of her peers. Her opinion of how selfies were used by her peers seems to echo that of her views related to Facebook -- being too controlled about how you look in a photograph creates an impression of yourself that may not be accurate.

Amanda shared Sea's friends' concerns about letting other people take her photograph without too much direction or input from her.

Amanda ~ I also don't really like it when people take pictures of me, either, so if I'm the only one taking pictures of me then it doesn't really matter if I made a weird face in one cause I'll just laugh at it and delete it... where you don't have full control when other people take a picture of you.

Earlier Amanda discussed not feeling comfortable sharing close up photographs of herself and this might be attributed to her shyness. She did not say why a close up photograph was often undesirable to share with other people but in this quotation she mentioned that when other people take her photograph she is not in control. If someone were to post her photograph on social media she would be fairly powerless as to where it went. This idea is very much like the way Sea's friends felt -- who had insisted that she delete photographs they did not like or did not want to be seen by other people, in person, or online. It is not surprising that Amanda was uneasy with having her photograph taken by other people. Being in control was a critical element of Amanda's personality; and it manifested itself through her photographic practice, her dedication to her music, and through her body issues. Given the many instances in today's media where post-feminism persuades young women that individualism is a key part of being a successful woman in today's society, the desire for control over her own image seems to stem from her exposure to these messages. Being in control of a situation was one way that Amanda felt comfortable -- with her photography, and I would assume based on our discussions, with other parts of her life like her weight and appearance.

Social Media Nexus Summary

Facebook, Tumblr, Instagram and the other social media provided places for Sea, Netra, and Amanda to express their identities to the extent that they were comfortable while connecting with like-minded members of communities, putting out what they chose to and holding back other elements about their experiences. The participants learned social norms through explicit and implicit messages they received when visiting social media sites, affording them models to use when assessing how they measured up to

cultural ideals and/or their peers. The easy access to and speed with which the girls participated, contributed, received feedback, and interacted with friends and strangers made social media attractive to them and many youth like them. Their interviews indicated that there was some resistance to social media. Flaws included the ways in which there was a lack of control over how their posts, photographs, comments etc. were understood, and also how many social media sites and applications became the focus of their (and their peers') lives, shifting attention from the lived moment to reporting to others about the lived moment in particular ways that contributed to their constructed on- and off-line identities. Selfies as a microcosm of social media in general proved to be an outlet to express themselves while at the same time a place of cautionary participation.

Chapter 6: The Appearance Nexus

Introduction

Although the findings presented in chapters 5 - 7 centre on three participants, all eight girls submitted photographs and shared stories that related to their appearance. Through the explanations of the three main participants I learned about their rationale for wanting, and in some cases, needing to look a certain way. Reviewing the collection as a whole drew my attention to the many segments of bodies photographed by the girls, and their interviews provided some reasons as to why these photographs were made and/or shared. The influence of family, peers, and society directed the ways in which the girls thought about their bodies, the activities they conducted related to their weight and appearance, and the uses of their photographs. Of great importance to the participants was how other people came to understand them, based on what they looked like. This chapter will present data that highlights these themes and provides insight as to how photography played a central role in the interaction between the girls, their outward selves, and in turn, inward identities.

Appearance: Justification

Comprehending the significance of appearance in the girls' lives can start to be understood by investigating their stories concerning justification: their own explanations as to why they did what they did to change how they looked, how they felt about how they looked, and why how they looked was not acceptable to them. The stories came to me through their photographs, words, and actions. I saw the changes the girls made to themselves in their photographs and in person. I heard why they felt they needed to make

the changes and I observed them behaving in ways that suggested their appearance was a seminal part of who they were.

Justification: Doing it for Myself

I had asked the girls to help me get to know them through their photographs. During our interviews they shared what turned out to be critical information about themselves related to their appearance. Making sure I knew that they altered their appearance because they wanted to, not because they had to was emphasized by each of them. Often the justification to alter their appearance came in the form of a self-centered statement: “I do it for me” or words to that effect.

Netra ~ I actually do it for myself. I really like how my eyes look and it's usually when I'm looking in the mirror and I just look at my eyes and it feels really good. It's like, positive.

Amanda ~ ... For me this is not about other people looking at me differently. It's about me feeling better about myself, because -- just cause I sometimes I don't feel very good about myself. I don't know. I just thought that would help me feel better if I felt that I looked better.

Both Netra and Amanda (as well as other participants' whose data are not included here) used words like “good” and “better” to describe goals related to their appearance. Rarely did they elaborate on what “good” meant to them. Netra seemed unable to identify what it was about her eyes that she liked and that made her feel good. What did she mean by good? Perhaps she felt a sense of accomplishment when she looked in the mirror and saw eyes that were similar to women she had seen in mass media, who had been professionally painted and probably Photoshopped. Maybe she liked the attention she got

when people noticed the way her eyes stood out because of the colours she used. What was it that Amanda meant when she said she wanted to feel better? Apart from a brief mention of wanting smaller thighs, she could or would not explain what “better” would feel like. Possibly she was referring to being able to post her own image on Tumblr to show off her weight-loss achievement. Maybe feeling better meant she complied with her self-imposed goals of which she (literally and figuratively) measured her achievement, which Photograph 136 (See Figure 7) showed as she measured her thigh in the top image.

As well as introducing a vagueness about how they could have felt or looked better, the above statements suggest the girls wanted me to know that the opinions of other people were not driving their actions -- they were not changing their looks to impress other people or garner attention from those around them. For some reason, perhaps the childhood caution: “Do not listen to what other people say about you,” they felt it necessary to explain that the idea of wanting to (and in some cases needing to) alter their appearance originated from (what they thought were) their own ideas, and not the ideas of others. Their efforts of applying make-up, counting calories, trying on new clothes, changing hair styles, and so on occurred because they felt the need to look and feel good and/or better, than they did at that time.

For Netra and Amanda, along with many people, wanting to feel good seemed tied to how they looked. But I believe there was more to adjusting their appearance than attempts to feel good or better. These girls were suggesting, or perhaps trying to clarify to me that they were not trying, to look a certain way based on media and society’s norms, rather that they were going through beauty routines, habits, changes, and practices because they were putting themselves first, a concept which I interpret as the participants’ misunderstood message of feminism. There is a feminist message that can be heard in

their rationale in which they seem to be embracing their own voices. By taking control of how they looked and felt based on what *they* wanted, the girls' actions suggest an empowered spirit. However, they did not seem to realize that their desires were strongly influenced by the bombardment of visual images from frequent interactions with media presenting implicit and explicit standards for them to live up to.

Justification: Needing Comfort

In addition to wanting to look better or perhaps because it was a result of looking better, a few of the girls stated that their appearance-related actions occurred because of a need to be comfortable. This need for comfort suggests two things: the first is that they believed that comfort could be obtained through changing their appearance; and the second is that they were not in a place of comfort -- when viewing their own images, when speaking about their appearance, or when they were reflecting about their own experiences connected to how they felt about how they looked.

Amanda ~ It's really, really confusing... there are people that think kind of the same way as me except for then there's a difference because -- even I was reading last night [On Tumblr] people say all the time "I hate my body!" "I look disgusting!" "I'm gross!" "I'm so fat!" And I hate thinking like that. I don't think like that... I don't think it does anything for you to say such horrible things about yourself. And in saying that though, I still don't have great confidence... But at the same time I would still like it to be different. Just, not like for other people. I think it's for me because I feel like I'd feel more comfortable, even though I -- it's really conflicting in like every aspect because I feel like I'm fine the way I am but

at the same time I feel like I would feel better if I was -- like if my legs were smaller or something...

Netra ~ *It [wearing make-up] makes me feel more comfortable... and so usually it's just the eye because I like -- I feel like my eyes -- they have more expression so I, I sometimes talk with my eyes.*

Although both girls insisted that they altered their appearance for themselves, as a way to find comfort in how they looked, they were both -- seemingly without realizing it -- searching for this comfort because of their engagement with other people. Netra wanted her eyes to “do the talking” (Figure 15) when she was with others and Amanda was responding to what she had seen on Tumblr and in other media images.



Figure 15. Photograph 71 ~ Netra

Summary: Justification

To begin to understand the participants' lives and photographs I have started by examining their self-centered motivation for changing their appearance. "Doing it" for themselves so they looked and felt better and wanting to feel comfortable were the girls' reasons for why their appearance stands out as a central aspect of their photographic collections and the accompanying narratives, as well as offering some indicators about the girls' developing identities.

Appearance: Fetishization

In the process of changing their looks and trying to find comfort the participants showed evidence of self-examination -- a scrutinizing of themselves to find ways in which to alter, then achieve a better version of themselves. This self-examination seems to have led to a practice of fetishization, demonstrated in girls' collections where they included numerous examples of images of themselves as parts, rather than whole, as shown in the collage below (Figure 16).

It is possible that the tools with which their photographs were made, including handheld point-and-shoot cameras, camera phones, computer/ipad cameras, contributed to this segmenting of themselves in their photographs. The ability to operate a camera at arms length with the push of a button and instantly have an image of oneself affords the girls a way to create a collection of images to use in their self-scrutinizing. It also means that some parts of them have to be left out of the image simply because of how the lens can capture the image -- there is a limit to what can be fit into the frame of the image. This framing may encourage them to photograph the more significant parts of themselves -- the bits and pieces that they like, want to see more closely, and/or want to share with others through various social media sites.

themselves at a later time; and their collections allowed the girls to assess and compare themselves to society's norms.

Fetishization: Parts, Not Whole

In Netra's photographic collection, she included four photographs of one of her eyes and another nine in which she was purposefully photographing her aspects of her appearance -- how her hair, make-up, clothing, and fingernails looked (some of which appear in the collage below -- Figure 17).

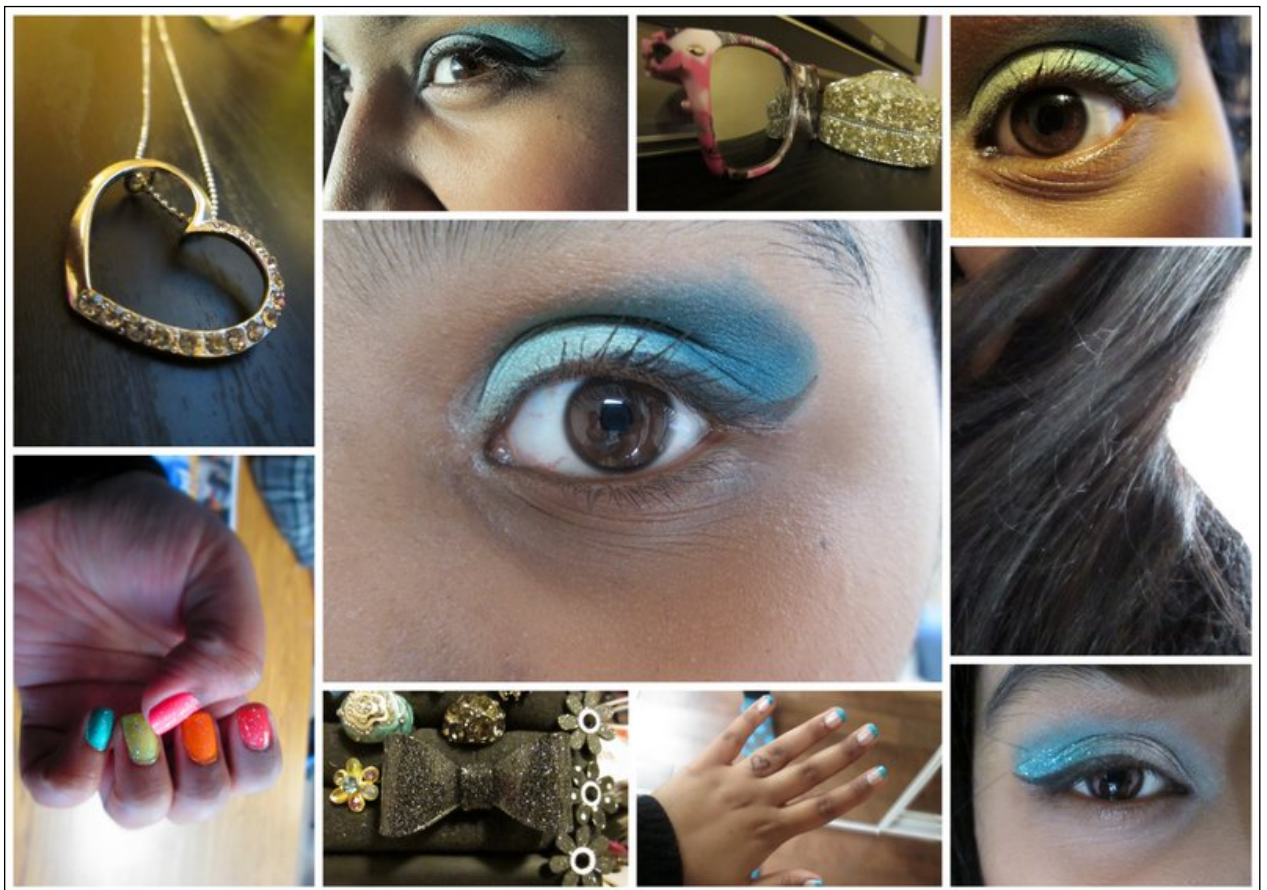


Figure 17. Selection of photographs taken by Netra

Netra's outward appearance was the subject of photographs that made up a third of the images she shared for the research. This indicates that how she looked was

something on which she placed a lot of importance in her day-to-day experience, and also her appearance was a common subject for her photography.

Netra ~ ...and I never think about taking pictures of my earrings or -- it's usually like the full [eye]. It's things that I work on in detail, like my eyes -- that I spend time on.

Like Netra, Sea also built a collection of photographs of herself using Instagram to house them. Often her images showed outfits she was trying on in various shops, like Photograph 140 (Figure 18).



Figure 18. Photograph 140 ~ Sea

In Photograph 140 Sea does not photograph herself as a whole person. She cut off most of her head and appears as just a body, almost like a mannequin. Whether this photographic-beheading was intentional or not does not seem to matter as the headless body indicates what was and was not important to Sea -- the clothing on/and her body. The dress and how it looked on her body were the significant elements in this photograph, not Sea being identified as the wearer or as participant in the trying-on experience. There is an anonymity to this photograph. A distance has been created between Sea the person (a whole) and Sea the body (a part) as well as an emphasis on the objectification of the external parts of Sea. In this way, Sea might have wanted to remove the personal element of how the dress fit her -- the whole person -- so if she were unsatisfied it would have less of an effect on how she felt about herself.

In another example of the girls' fetishistic photographs Amanda also created images that showed only parts of her body. Amanda revealed that she was unhappy with how her body looked and there were parts of her that she would have liked to be thinner/smaller. Amanda had previously undergone corrective surgery on her jaw and because of it the shape of her face had changed. When discussing Photograph 48 (Figure 19), taken after her surgery, Amanda commented on the difference she could see.

Amanda ~ *It's like sometimes I feel -- like I look at myself and it's kind of weird cause, I guess sometimes I look at it and I feel like my face looks wider and I'm like "What?! Did I gain weight?" but then I'm like ... my face just isn't as angled, like this (traces her jaw line) is more out...*

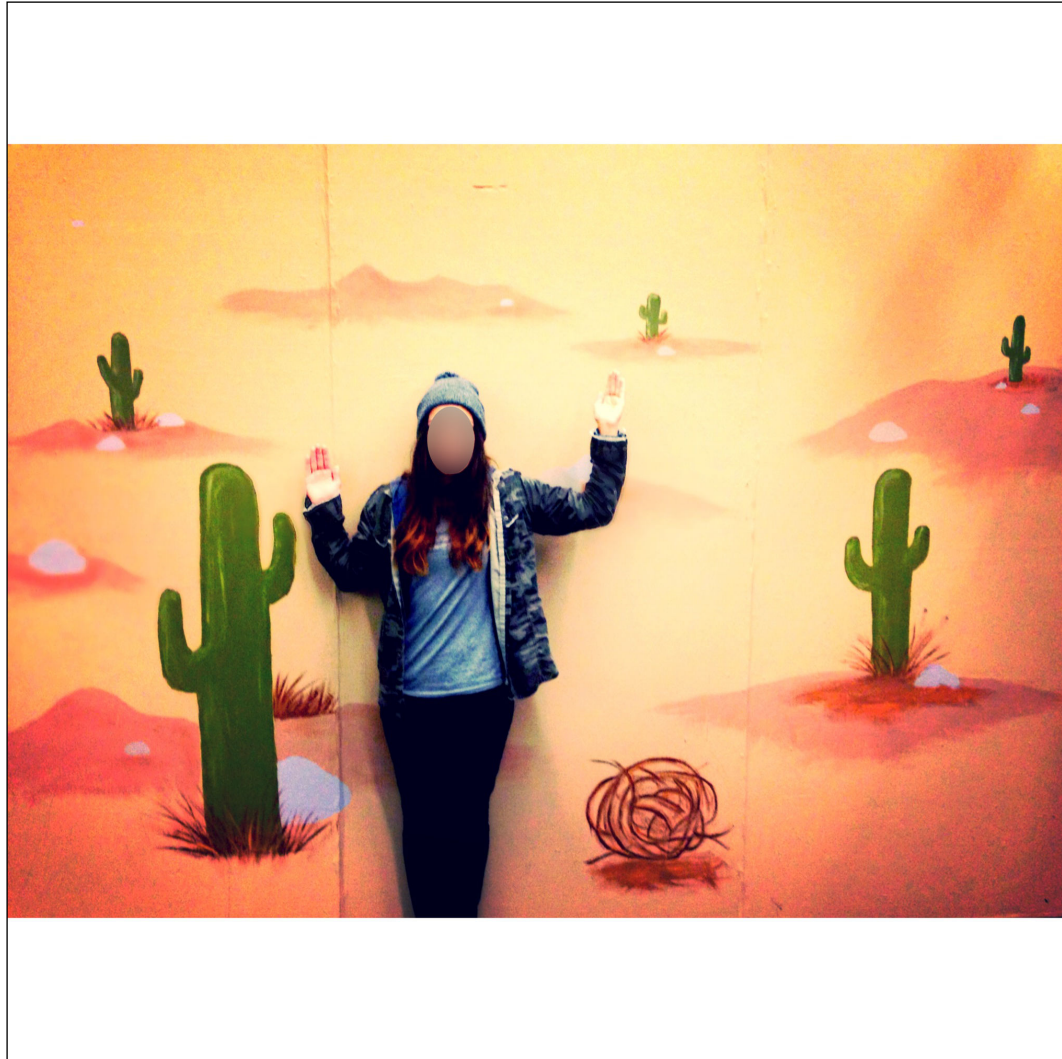


Figure 19. Photograph 48 ~ Amanda

The blurring for privacy does hide the jawline about which Amanda was referring, however in the original photograph her face and its shape are clearly seen. The surgery and her new jawline may have given Amanda a focal point to consider -- suddenly having a new face would be unnerving for anyone -- however it was Amanda's concern over her possible weight gain that seemed to be her concern. These changes may have contributed to her fetishizing parts of her body in her mind and through her photographs.

The girls' photographs allow, perhaps invite, a sense of pieces to be viewed rather than a whole person being reflected in the picture. The framing function of the camera

can add to the separation of the girls' bodies into pieces, however in their statements they refer predominantly to their parts that are shown in their photographs, and not what has been left out. In addition to focusing on certain parts when making their photographs, the girls also used their images to review their appearance as time passed.

Fetishization: Later Examination

The girls created and curated collections of photographs showing parts of themselves with ease mainly due to abundant camera phones, and easy access to computer editing apps and software; Netra kept her photographs on her computer and Sea posted hers on Instagram. Gone are the days of waiting weeks for prints to be sent and then having small reproductions to view as 4 x 6 prints. Instead the girls were able to take advantage of digital files and other technology to instantly have images of themselves, and to be able to zoom in on parts of themselves they may have had trouble viewing in the past. Netra purposefully built a collection of photographs of herself. She said she used her photographs as a method to record her physical (and possibly other?) transformation over time. The images, including her selfies and make-up related photographs, were stored as digital files on her computer.

Netra ~ There's a file that just says "Me" and oh my god I've had it since I had bangs and I've been looking at myself and it's like "Wow, I'm changing!" Like, in the past year I'm changing so, so much... I kind of like having it to see how I mature.

Photograph 185 (Figure 20) is an example of the kind of photograph found in the "Me" file on Netra's computer.



Figure 20. Photograph 185 ~ Netra

Reviewing her photographs over the course of a year or two, as Netra had done, allowed her to see the gradual changes in herself as she matured. She used these photographs to get to know herself better; she could see what she was like in the past and how she had changed and grown.

Amanda also used photographs to revisit how she used to look and compare it to how she currently looked. Her collection did not seem to be as formal as Netra's "Me" file, however she did go back repeatedly to see how she had changed over time, like Netra.

Amanda ~ ...So [after] *about two weeks not eating much and having mostly liquid* [due to her facial surgery] -- *after that I would lose a lot of weight. And then I was slowly getting it back and I was so excited to be eating again... But*

then, a few months ago, I was looking at pictures and I saw a picture from when I was ok to see friends again after my surgery... I was like "Whoa! I was really thin!" I was thinner then. And then I was like "Ohh. I like how my legs look in that and I feel bad now because I'm not that thin anymore."

Amanda's dislike for her body seemed to arise during the period between her surgery, and its resulting weight loss, and her return to her pre-surgery size/weight. The adjustment in her face's shape and the size of her legs prompted some reviewing of her photographs to track how she had changed. It is likely that during these reviews she noticed other parts of her that were different too. Given her developing dysmorphia about her weight, along with many societal pressures, Amanda's photographs became a convenient source of comparison.

Fetishization: Societal Norms

Netra's many comments and photographs related to her appearance indicate the significant value she placed on how she looked. Whether consciously or not, Netra must have been comparing her frequent photographs of her eye or her nails to those she had seen in the media and to people around her, like her peers. Careful examination of her make-up application, which was able to be done through her photographic practice, did in some way reinforce the separation between Netra as a whole person and Netra as a set of pieces, each one carefully constructed to send certain messages to those who view her, perhaps also to herself. In the same way, Sea's collection seemed to have been used as a reference for comparison. It may be that Sea was trying to separate herself (as a whole) to avoid the affects of not meeting the standards that society has currently adopted for young women wearing certain styles of clothing. Amanda also responded to the models and

standards surrounding her in the media in her photographic practice; specifically in photograph 136 (Figure 21). As previously shown in Chapter 5 in relation to her inspiration from social media for the topic of her photo-essay about eating disorders, this photograph included her own seemingly flawed thighs as the subject of the top photograph.

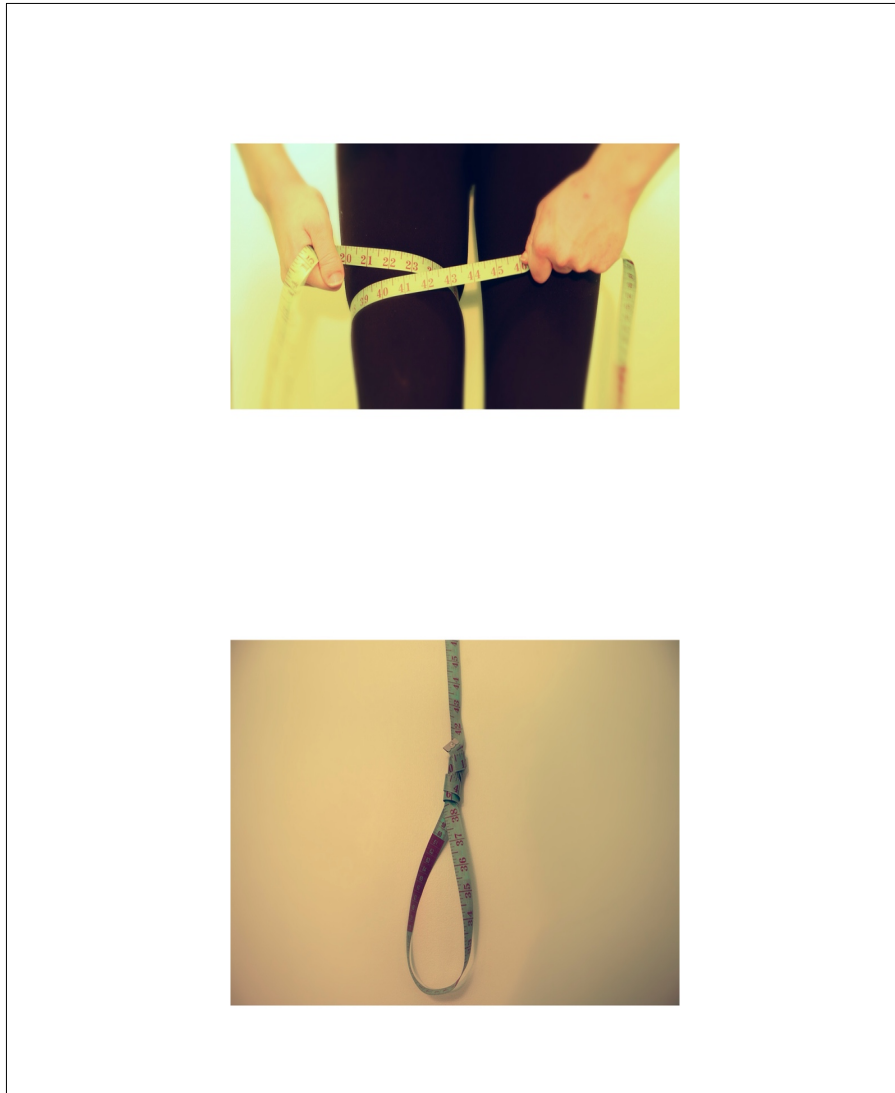


Figure 21. Photograph 136 ~ Amanda

As stated above, having smaller legs was one goal that Amanda was working towards.

When she identified pieces of herself that were not acceptable a practice of fetishization

occurred -- through repeated viewing, measuring, and comparing of her parts to how they looked in the past and to the bodies she had seen on Tumblr and in other media.

Amanda ~ *It's kind of like back and forth. Because sometimes I'm fine. Like, "Oh, I look fine." But then other times I see it just a little bit. I'm never -- I never say "I HATE my body! I'm so disgusting!" I see that a lot and that makes me uncomfortable. I don't want to think that about my body and I don't feel that way either. But there are just some things that I just think like "Oh, I would like it if I would just change a little bit here" and stuff like that. I still compare my body to other people, like even my friends and stuff. I just look and I'm like "I wish I looked like that"...*

It is possible that Amanda learned how to separate her body into pieces to be examined by viewing images online, specifically Tumblr. I conducted a simple search within Tumblr using the keyword thin. It initially brought up a warning about eating disorders and how to get help if you thought you might have one and then provided an option to continue to the search results. The search results contained a seemingly endless supply of shockingly thin (almost exclusively) women's body parts -- legs, thigh gaps, stomachs, ribs, hips, bottoms, arms, etc. -- with "inspirational" phrases like "Pretty girls don't eat" by @thinthinnerthinnest and "You've come to far to take orders from a cookie" by @cinderellathatwearsconverse. Amanda's photograph could easily fit into the pages of pictures I viewed and this suggests that she would have felt she was "doing it" right -- focusing in on one part to change and then changing it to meet her weight goal and fit in with the site's (and society's) expectations.

Summary: Fetishization

Sea, Amanda, and Netra all shared photographs and stories that revealed much of their attention is spent on their appearance, specifically considering how parts of their bodies look. The girl appears in pieces: nails, legs, hair, feet, eyes, ears, and so on. The splitting apart of herself through photography suggests a process of fetishization. The girls engaged in repeated viewing of their images, of their parts, sometimes on a larger-than-life scale because of the easy ability to enlarge and focus using cell phone cameras and free software editing programs. This re-viewing allowed for the girls to see themselves in ways no one else would probably ever see them, almost inhumanly. The process of fetishizing themselves did not seem to have created the “look good or look better” result that they wanted to find. Rather it helped them isolate and separate their bodies into pieces, compare those pieces to their previous photographs and other people’s body parts, and identify the parts of themselves they felt they needed to “*work on*” as Netra stated. The work the girls undertook is explored in the next section.

Appearance: Habits

As mentioned above, the girls’ discussion about their appearance included some justification about why they needed to change how they looked: for themselves to look and feel better. This need led to a scrutinizing of themselves (fetishization) which specified the parts that they wanted or needed to change. In this section I will explore the routine practices (which I have identified as habits) that the girls adopted in order to try and reach that initial goal of looking/feeling better. A habit can be defined (Merriam-Webster, 2015) as:

- A behaviour pattern acquired by frequent repetition or physiologic exposure that shows itself in regularity or increased facility of performance

- An acquired mode of behaviour that has become nearly or completely involuntary

For the participants, habits were more than just a repeated action; they became an answer to the question: How can I look/feel better? The examples provided below highlight some of the ritualistic behaviours in which the girls' engaged. The girls enacted these behaviours in order to try and feel better and/or comfortable; to prevent feeling self-conscious or embarrassed. Adopting habits gave the girls a sense of control over their lives, their appearance, and (to some extent) how other people viewed them. In addition, each habit was a priority for the girls -- a priority over her health, family relationships, food, and/or behaving naturally (i.e. without constantly monitoring her behaviour).

Habits: Feeling Comfortable

Sea's photographic collection contained a number of images in which she was the central subject. Her face often made up a large part of the image giving the impression that she was fairly confident in how she looked. Her large smile was present in a number of her photographs, like in Photograph 222 (Figure 22).

As she reviewed her collection one of her insecurities was revealed, which lead to her exposing one of her appearance-related habits.

Sea ~ I think I look better when I smile big because then it kind of -- I'm really self-conscious about that one tooth that kind of sticks out -- there's kind of a gap and so I just feel like it kind of hides it when I smile big instead of smaller... I pointed it out once to my friend and I was like "Oh! I hate that picture! It makes me look weird because my tooth is weird!" And she had no idea- but then she was like "Oh! I can kind-of see it now" but... she said it was cute because it's part of

me and you don't really notice it but once you do it's not a big deal. But, it was always kind of a big deal to me because I just thought it made me look a lot less attractive than I could be, which kind of sounds silly because it's a tiny thing... it's not a big thing anymore really but I do kind of see that I still try to hide it.



Figure 22. Photograph 222 ~ Sea

Sea stated she wanted to avoid feeling self-conscious and changing her smile allowed her to do this. Did the altered behaviour (and subsequent change to her appearance) result in Sea feeling better about herself, or did she feel better knowing that if she changed her behaviour she would (in her opinion) look better? Sea found comfort when she reached a certain level of attractiveness and that level was achieved when her tooth was less noticeable. The complex thoughts related to this habit were not further expanded upon by Sea, however when she viewed numerous photographs of herself, I noted that her initial

comments were about her smile and the tooth -- they were the first things she noticed.

This lead me to think that she was used to looking at herself (either in photographs or in the mirror) and judging how she looked.

Netra also adopted daily habits in order to find comfort in how she looked.

Photograph 184 (Figure 23) showed the results of her make-up routine and displays Netra as I regularly saw her: wearing blue eye shadow, thick black eye-liner, mascara, skin foundation, blush, and tinted lip gloss.



Figure 23. Photograph 184 ~ Netra

Applying make-up was *the* critical act in Netra's day and just as critical was how she felt when she was wearing it. "*I guess I don't feel confident enough to go to school without makeup but that's just because it's kind of like a routine.*" Being insecure (or not confident) made Netra uncomfortable so employing her make-up routine afforded her a method of increasing her confidence. It is possible to see Netra's make-up as a mask of sorts, one she adorned daily but why? What might have caused her to want to hide her natural (un-made-up) face from her classmates? It is unclear whether Netra wanted to hide behind this mask or wore it to try and look a certain way, however wearing make-up provided Netra with a sense of comfort and brought her confidence, which were the desired results she had been hoping for when she was discussing her reasons for wanting to alter her appearance.

Habits: Priorities

The action of producing a sincere smile is (and should be?) fairly spontaneous for most people, however for Sea, having a camera in front of her caused her to change her behaviour. The act of smiling "*big*" as a way to hide her offending tooth seemed to provide Sea with her desired result of looking acceptable in a photograph. I find it significant that Sea identified her own behaviour as slightly surprising: "*I do kind of see that I still try to hide it.*" The habit of smiling big to hide her tooth was so ingrained that Sea was unaware she was still practicing it. At some prior time, Sea prioritized her appearance being a certain way over being present in the moment. In order to ensure the big smile occurred, Sea must have had to monitor herself whenever a camera appeared.

Like Sea's carefully performed (but now automatic) big smiles, Netra vigilantly followed her make-up routine, so much so that it interrupted how she engaged with the world and became a priority over most other things in her life.

Netra ~ My mom is like every time in the morning we get up, she's like "Wow! You can't do anything without make up you know!" She's like "Stop -- come and eat at least. You don't even eat. You should eat -- stop thinking about makeup -- just eat!" and I'm just like, "Yeah I'll be there in like 10 minutes." I feel like I can't go anywhere without makeup, like when I go to the store with my grandpa and stuff, they are like "Let's go now!" and I'm like "Wait 10 minutes!"

Netra's make-up practice disrupted when she ate or went out with her family -- it came before their wants or what they felt was best for her. Her appearance preceded her participation in many of her family's activities, including those related to her cultural and religious celebrations. Although her mother expressed concern, Netra's story seems to suggest that nothing was going to distract her from what she felt she needed to do.

Habits: Public and Private

The routines the participants discussed and their photographic collections revealed their private thinking about their public appearance. Some of their routines were hidden from others, like Sea being careful to always "smile big". No one would know that she was purposefully changing her smile unless she told them. Netra's daily make-up habit was very consciously practiced, and easily observed by her family, and probably her friends. By adopting habits, the girls seemed to have found ways to exert some control over their lives, specifically their appearance and how others perceived them. The application of make-up and daily practice of creating/influencing how she looked may

have provided Netra a way to feel like she was in control of how other people saw her. By selecting so many photographs of her body parts, it seems that her intention was to perhaps control how I should see her, and maybe how she saw herself. Her public appearance was certainly affected by the regimen she followed. Sea's habit of hiding her tooth seemed (at the time when we spoke about it) to be enacted unconsciously and her action was not apparent to those around her, but the outcome was -- a big smile. How she looked to those around her was a direct result of her smile gesture.

Amanda's habits fit somewhere in between Netra's public and Sea's somewhat private ways of modifying themselves. Because of Amanda's desire to lose weight and look "healthy" she adopted a number of behaviours that she felt would alter her weight. These rituals were private and performed in secret, with only the results visible to other people. Amanda explained how she became more involved in trying to change her body, and in the previous chapter I included a longer version of this quotation that outlines both the influence of social media on her thinking and her focus on her adoption of "*bad habits*" because of it.

Amanda ~ *And I've never -- I've never gone through what most of them have, because theirs [eating disorders] are really extreme but I was still thinking basically the same way and it was kind of getting to a point where I was starting to fall into bad habits.*

It's hard to know if Amanda's repeated visits to Tumblr to look at images of thin women became a habit, however it certainly tainted her ideas about how a healthy body should look. It seemed difficult for Amanda to admit that her behaviour had started to change as she started "*to fall into bad habits.*" Amanda's struggle was trying to fit herself on a continuum that stretched from healthy people to those with "*really extreme*" eating

disorder experiences. As I had come to discover about Amanda from our previous meetings, she regularly strived to “do the right thing”, whether at school, in her family or at work. Becoming aware that her own thinking was like people who were losing weight in unhealthy ways was alarming for her, because she did not usually do things that were bad, unhealthy, or wrong. I think this is why she talked about her behaviour as “*bad habits,*” because she was unable to admit to having an eating disorder, if, in fact she actually did. Instead, she identified things that she did which were similar to people who do have anorexia and categorized those behaviours as unhealthy. Amanda’s use of language was significant as she negotiated describing her thoughts and behaviour to me, while at the same time not feeling comfortable exposing too much -- whatever that might have been for her. Her purposefully chosen language demonstrates another habit that has public and private elements related to it.

This verbal negotiation continued as Amanda elaborated on her behaviours related to food. Her caloric conduct became something that she knew she must control or else she would end up becoming sick. The more Amanda shared about her relationship with food and her appearance, the more she began to refer to this relationship, and its negative elements, as “*it*” -- another public habit (related to language), although one of which I think she was not aware.

Amanda ~ *Well it’s like a weird thing because I love food; I really love food and I love good food. I love avocados and stuff like that... I’m at a point right now where -- ok, I’m eating more because I kept trying not to eat much but that’s like - - bad, and I know that’s bad -- so that’s I think why I’m never getting really deep into it, because I know how bad it is and it doesn’t really help.*

Amanda revealed a slight sense of relief when she said she was “*never getting really deep into it.*” Amanda used “*it*” repeatedly in our lengthy discussions to refer to her issues with food, body image, eating disorder-like behaviour and weight loss. Using “*it*” was how she addressed this ongoing experience without having to name the experience/condition explicitly -- perhaps even because she did not feel she could give it a name. Each time she is unable and/or unwilling to speak specifically about her experience she defaults to a vague and catch-all term instead. She repeatedly chose phrases that implied or alluded to what I interpret as eating disorders and/or body dysmorphia. These phrases also keep her experience somewhat private or secretive because they allow her to not have to name what she is doing or feeling. By stating she would not go “*deep into it*” she wanted me, and perhaps herself, to know that she understood just how dangerous these kinds of behaviours could be and that ultimately they do not lead to the outcome she desired which was to change how her body looked in a healthy and sustainable way.

Apart from her habits of not trying to eat much and using “*it*” to refer to a much more complex and broad concept, Amanda admitted to other behavioural habits too: weighing herself whenever possible; counting calories compulsively; and exercising whenever she did eat.

Amanda ~ *Well, my mom doesn't have a scale because she was like “We'll get really obsessed with it if we have --” well not me, but she was like, “If I have a scale then I get really obsessed with it, so I don't want a scale in the house.” But I, anytime I can I do -- so that's the part that I'm not out of yet.*

+++

~ Cause I don't want to obsess over it, because I am and I do count calories obsessively... and then with food right now I'll eat it but then if I eat -- like if I

think I ate too much or if I have kind of unhealthy stuff then I feel like I have to exercise right now ... so it's not a good relationship with food right now I don't think, but I'm trying to get out of it so I don't go deeper into the bad part.

+++

~ Trying to limit yourself on how much you eat to an unhealthy amount and then, even then trying to exercise when you don't even have the energy to do it because you're not feeding yourself enough and yeah, I don't want to put my body into starvation mode, cause that's not good.

Again Amanda alluded to these private behaviours and ways of thinking as “*it*” and “*the bad part*.” She was trying to control every aspect of how her body processed food and created energy for her and at the same time she struggled to stay healthy, both mentally and physically. This struggle was ongoing and Amanda kept it to herself for the most part. Amanda’s use of the word “obsess” implied that she was unable to stop the thoughts and behaviours she was experiencing -- an indicator that they were habits because they were hard to stop. These mainly secretive activities became habitual for her due to their daily, sometimes almost constant performance. Amanda knew that certain behaviours would do her harm and at the same time she found it difficult to engage with food in healthful ways. Although Amanda had told me that she was uncomfortable discussing her body and weight with her friends or family, her Photographic Essay and accompanying poem (see Chapter 7: The Identity Nexus) suggest that she wanted to invite other people into her experience, making the private more public.

Summary: Habits

Each example above includes a few essential aspects: the habit was ongoing; the habit was critical to how they saw their appearance; engaging in the habit provided results that altered how they looked. Whether the activities the girls adopted should be classified as healthy or unhealthy is of slightly less importance than the fact that the constant and regimented practice of the activity significantly altered how the girls experienced their lives. Sea, Amanda, and Netra provided photographs and stories that all support the ideas that their ability to look certain ways would bring them comfort and included both public and private habits. Each girl's habits suggest that they help her feel and look good or better about herself. The focus up to this point in the exploration of their appearance has been mainly on their internal ideas and behaviours. I will now introduce how the girls' interaction (implicit and explicit) with those around them and with external influences impacted their photographs and ideas about their appearance.

Appearance: Anxiety of Misrepresentation

Despite the fact that the participants expressed their motivation for why they felt the need to alter their appearance as being personal, they were also influenced by the opinions of both real and perceived audiences. What other people thought or might have been thinking about them was another reason as to why the girls wanted to look certain ways. The girls seemed to express a heightened awareness of or threat from what others might think of them, and that they would be misunderstood. The possibility of what others thought of them seemed to cause some concerns and this led to changes in their behaviour, appearance, and thinking about themselves.

The photographs in this collage (Figure 24) have been selected because each girl has referenced how others (might) see her when discussing her pictures. The participants'



Figure 24. Photographs Related to Anxiety of Misrepresentation may not have been aware of, or may not have wanted to admit it (see Justification) but their photographs and stories suggest that what other people thought about them mattered. It mattered enough that they made sure their appearance reflected how they wanted to be seen; how they wanted to be thought of by those around them.

Netra ~ *When you put makeup [on], you seem, you seem more energetic.*

+++

~ But I feel like a full picture, like 202, is good. It shows your whole body language -- because I felt sexy... [In Photograph 75] (in Figure 24) you can't see my pants or anything and it doesn't show my full body language and even my eyes... like each photo -- you can't get everything that is there right?

+++

~ It does mean something to me when they say, "Oh! Your eyes look really pretty today," and I'm just like, "Oh thanks!" It's kind of like a photographer... And if they [the photographer] show it to someone else and they are like "Oh that's really pretty! That's a beautiful view!" Then they are thinking something good about her [the photographer]. About her talent for making a great photograph. Like there's art galleries to show off your photos so when you are going out with your make-up done, you kind of become the photo gallery.

Sea ~ *That was a really cute dress that I saw at the Decade/Flavour pop up store... I think people look really good, or some people can look really good, in the long striped dresses... So I always wanted to try one on and see... I thought it was really cute but I was like "I don't know." If I wore that and a lot of people have those and I don't really want to be the same as everyone else. Because everyone in summer is going to be wearing those -- so I didn't buy it and I don't really regret it -- but it does look good I think. (Top Right Photograph in Figure 24)*

Amanda ~ *Ok, last year was when I really started thinking about how my body looks and how I wasn't happy with it very much. And also it was about a year ago actually when my grandma was like "Oh, well you're a pear shape." But I don't know why -- I just took it really personally. Even though that's just a shape of a body and that's just like -- some people are like that and that's not necessarily like "Oh, you're fat"-- it's just how your body is shaped and I was like "Oh no! I don't want to be a pear! I don't!"*

These stories reveal the girls' struggles between wanting to be themselves and wanting other people to see them in a certain way. Netra's comment that "*You can't get everything that is there right?*" exposes potential anxiety that she, and the others, held about how their audiences might have come to know them based on what they looked like. It seemed like Netra was suggesting that if "*you*" judge me based on my outer appearance, you could be misinterpreting who I am. She addressed the idea that a photograph might not show her whole physical self, but I believe there is a concern that her inner self could also be misunderstood. Her metaphor of being the art in a gallery demonstrated that she expects to be looked at, judged, and understood based on how she looked. Sea echoed Netra's feeling as she worried about looking like everyone else who would also be wearing the same style of dress later in the summer, and judged for it. Sea's quotation hints that she was also concerned -- implying that 'If you see me look like everyone else, you may assume (incorrectly) that I am like them'. Amanda did not hide her concerns about what her grandmother thought of her shape. Her exclamation "I don't want to be a pear!" (A story serendipitously coupled by me with the photograph above that showed a pear in a pile of avocados) clearly showed the opinions of those around her had an impact on how she wanted to be seen.

Summary: Anxiety of Misrepresentation

For each of these girls, the threat or intimidation from what other people might think of her caused a change in her behaviour and/or her thinking about herself. Netra ensured she was always wearing make-up so she would appear a particular way. Sea did not purchase a dress in which she felt she looked good because it might have lead to her being misunderstood or blending in with the crowd. Amanda began a dangerous habit of weight obsessive behaviours to avoid fitting into someone else's opinion of her. The way the girls felt about themselves transformed because of real and imagined ideas that other people had about them. Their goals of looking and feeling good/better were compromised when they experienced confusion about how they wanted to look was compared to how other people might have seen them. Enhancing and supplementing the girls' ideas about how their audience should or could have been viewing them were the ever-present concepts (from outside influences) that they had learned that dictated what they were supposed to look like.

Appearance Nexus Summary

Developmentally, the participants' often-unwavering attention to their appearance is quite normal. It is perhaps, the ways in which the girls can pay attention to themselves (using many forms of technology to observe and alter their appearance), and the focus that societal norms suggests they should to be paying to their appearance that lead to unhealthy behaviours and thoughts. When Amanda stated that she wanted to feel better about herself by having smaller legs or making other changes she seemed to be misleading herself because I think she was somewhat missing out on the fact that her idea of what looked good was shaped by many outside influences like: Tumblr users, peers in school, her family's opinion about her looks, popular culture's advertisements, etc. Sea's

focus on one small part of her (her tooth, like Amanda's legs) and Netra's emphasis on her eye make-up are examples of how they wanted to change something to feel better and, like Amanda, their understanding that what it meant to look better came from external influences was lacking. Critical to countering some of the more harmful messages to which the girls are exposed is helping them understand that they are more than their appearance, and that their passions, talents, interests, and more contribute to their identities and how others can come to know them, as well as how they come to know themselves.

Chapter 7: The Identity Nexus

Introduction

Photographs offer visual stories about experiences and they reveal something about the photographer, whether the photographer is aware of it or not. In subscribing to this idea I wanted to determine how the participants understood their own identities, how their photographic collections reflected or revealed any aspects of their identities to themselves and to those viewing them, and what I could extrapolate from these to female youth identities more generally. ‘Identity’ and ‘self’ are complex terms and how I draw from their meanings has been outlined earlier in this work (see Literature Review). Essential to understanding how the participants express themselves through their photography and stories is Heilman’s (1998) statement: “Post-modern theorists see self as something fluid and changing, depending on the circumstances or mode,” (p. 189). In answering the question “Who are you?” identity-markers like age, ethnicity, ability, etc., can be used but there are many more ways to respond, depending on who is asking and in what situation the question is being asked. Subtle, less obvious answers can also be communicated through visual means, sometimes in ways the photographer is not even aware. During adolescence, youth are exploring how they can answer this question as they mature and develop their self-knowledge and identities. Some of the participants came to realize that who they were (how they presented and thought about themselves) changed because of the circumstances in which their identity was being discussed as well as the experiences influencing and informing them. Identity is an ongoing process and, like photography, shares the quality of indexicality -- its meaning is highly contextual.

This chapter begins with the participants sharing their ideas about how they understood the term identity. Collages of photographs from Sea, Netra, and Amanda's collections are presented next (Figures 25, 26, & 27) and viewers/readers are invited to create their own interpretations of what photographs can reveal about these girls, as well as people in general. Evidence of how the participants actively constructed their own identities and key aspects of their identities are presented. Missing from their photographs but strongly present in many of their stories were their family and peers as significant influences on the girls' identities. Finally the pressures, tensions and desire to present themselves as "fitting in" to society's norms has also impacted how their identities were developing. As they viewed and reviewed their photographic collections, the photographs and the accompanying stories revealed self-knowledge and tensions that also influenced who they were and how they lived their lives. Their photographs and narratives communicated a desire to be unique and noticed for the "right" reasons, while at the same time wanting to be a part of the group and fit in. The "right" reasons were dynamic -- shifting due to context, media influences, peer interactions, and other factors, making it difficult for them to know whether they had achieved their goals.

Identity: Participants Defining Identity

To facilitate having the girls consider their photographic collections as possibly reflective of aspects of their identities, I began by asking them to share their understanding of the term 'identity'. Having each girl define what identity meant to her, rather than me defining it for her, allowed her to reflect on her photographs without me controlling or directing what she "should" have been looking for. Netra explained her understanding of identity as:

Netra ~ *What I look like...what kind of a person I am, what kind of things make it so you can identify me... I do remember saying that you still haven't got your whole identity; you are still making your identity.*

This explanation highlights how I was coming to know Netra through her photographs and our conversations about them. Many of her photographs demonstrate attentiveness to her appearance and it was the first thing she mentioned when asked about identity. How other people could possibly identify her was also a key theme in many of the stories she shared. Her idea of ongoing identity formation seemed to relate to a concept of multiple identities, depending on the context and people present. Netra acknowledged that she was changing over time and although she did not recognize identity as being indexical, the concept of “*still making your identity*” does suggest her as having some knowledge of its variability.

Amanda echoed Netra's ideas when she defined identity as “*how I think and how I act*” adding that it made her think of her “*personality.*” She placed value on how she engaged with the world, through her thinking and doing, and whereas Netra's understanding of identity also included her outward appearance Amanda did not mention this aspect. Given Amanda's struggle with body issues I find her omission of appearance as part of her identity thought-provoking. Amanda spent much of her time engaged in activities that related to her appearance (for instance counting calories, exercising, browsing images of people's bodies on Tumblr) and she indicated it was something that was almost always on her mind. She stated her identity is “*how I think and how I act*” however her refusal to acknowledge these body-related acts and thoughts is a denial of part of her current identity.

Sea described identity by explaining similar ideas to the others. She also showed some understanding that other people were interconnected to her identity, both as they influenced her identity formation and how they interpreted her identity.

Sea ~ I think about like sexuality and I think about colours and how you present yourself to the world and what you surround yourself with, including the kind of people and the places that you go and just stuff that you -- physical things that you have in life.

As we discussed her life experiences and photographs relating to identity, more complex and harder-to-define concepts arose, like her morality and where she was in the world. In later conversations, Sea also talked about how she was influenced by what others thought of her, adding pressure to how she felt she should portray herself. She also emphasized the importance of being open to all different kinds of people.

Netra and Sea both included how their outward presentation to the world is a part of their identity. Although Amanda did not explicitly state this idea, there are instances from her data that do confirm her understanding of this connection. Since appearance has been discussed at length in a previous chapter it will not be a focus of this section, however it also cannot be ignored. It is imperative to mention that there are many examples in the girls' stories and photographs where identity markers and appearance overlap.

Participants Define Identity: Collages

The collages below (Figures 25, 26, & 27) include many of the photographs the participants shared as part of the data for this research. Before themes that arose within

the nexus of identity are addressed I encourage the reader to view these images and contemplate how elements of identity could be expressed within them.

- What could the girls have been consciously trying to share about themselves?
- What other possible meanings could be interpreted from these collections?

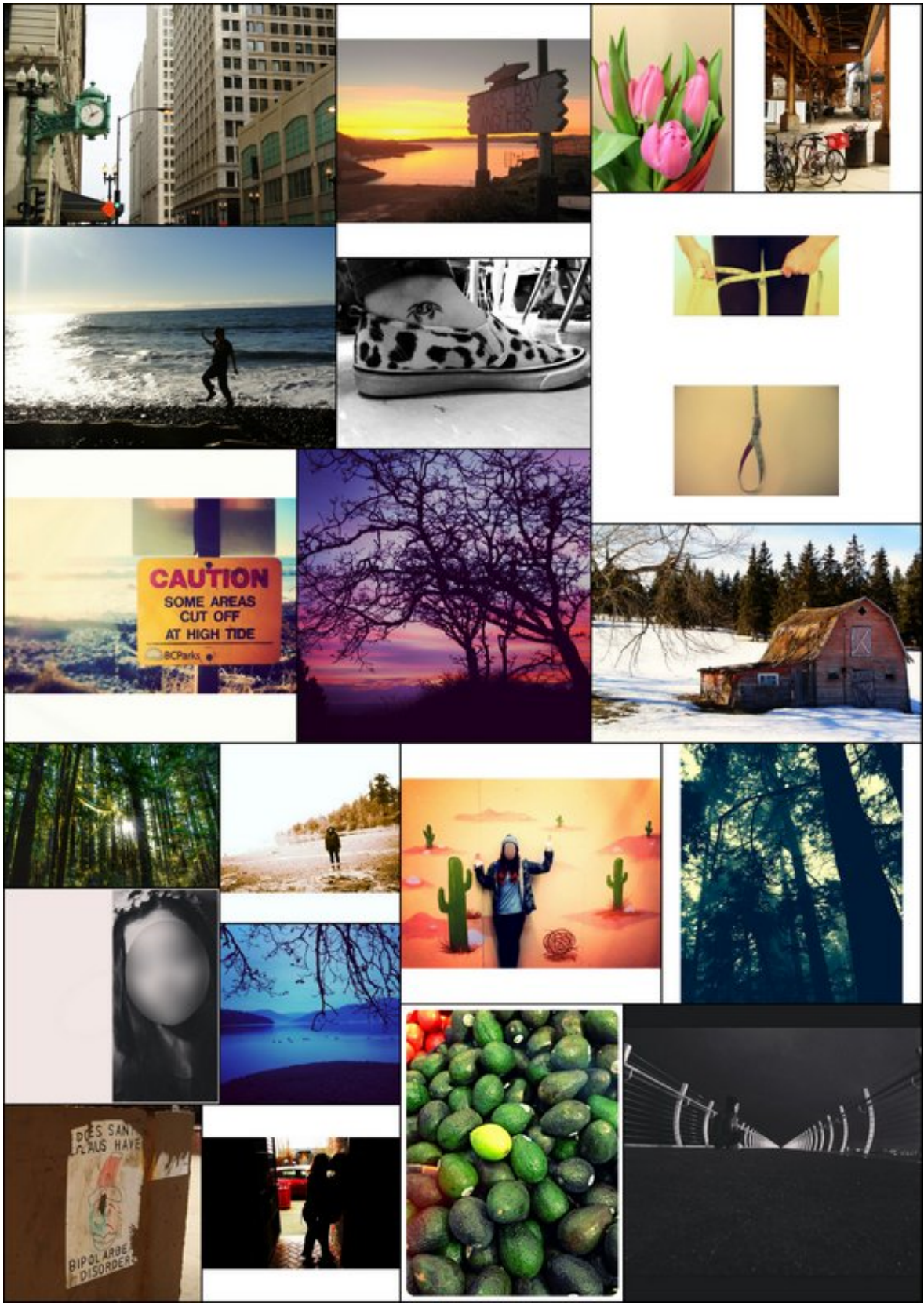


Figure 26. A collage of Amanda's photographs

Identity: Elements of Identities within Photographs

I asked the participants to reflect on their own photographic collections and describe whether aspects of their identities were present in the photographs they saw. I encouraged the girls to think about what their photographs showed about them and whether they had learned anything about themselves from this process. Netra quickly acknowledged the many images of her within her collection.

Netra ~ Well I see a lot of me in it... I guess I'm more into myself -- that's selfish but if I look at these -- I like nature. I like my outside friends. I like personal time, obviously. I like going out places with family and even though some of these aren't with family and I have no family photos in here.

Upon reviewing her images, Netra saw a pattern that showed many photographs of herself and from that drew the conclusion that she was, perhaps, selfish. At the time I recall her reaction being one of surprise seeing so many photographs in which she was the subject. This realization was quickly followed with a rebuttal of sorts as she went on to mention other aspects of her collection, like spending time on her own, with friends, and in nature. This seems to indicate that she was concerned with how others perceived her, and that she was not comfortable with the label of selfish, despite what her photographic collection showed.

In addition to including key aspects of her life Netra commented that her collection was missing things, saying that her photographic collection was just a portion of who she was. *"They are not my everyday life, they are not... these are like -- examples of me..."* The way she described her photographs was that they were *"just semi... they are just a little bit. It doesn't describe me. It does show my bubbly side and my mature side*

and it shows my nails and what I like.” Netra did not seem to realize that these photographs were depicting her “*everyday life*” and they did show her daily experiences to some degree. She did not see the collection as a complete record and I do not think photographs could demonstrate all aspects of someone’s life, but her photographs did contribute to showing some aspects of who she was. She noted that missing from the collection were things like her experiences with friends, people she was influenced by, classes at school that she enjoyed, teachers she liked etc. but it seemed difficult for her to describe exactly what should have been present in her collection and given the complex nature of what identity includes, perhaps her confusion is warranted. Piecing together photographs of herself from which to try and understand her full identity seemed inadequate for Netra (and I believe it would be for many people) but it also suggests she failed to see the significance of photographs she had taken and what they might have revealed about her.

It appears that through the research process, Netra came to see herself through other people’s eyes and saw how her collection could be (mis)understood. The missing subjects of her collection (experiences with family and friends for instance) were mentioned throughout her interviews, which indicates that they were valuable parts of her life. However Netra implied that without the visual evidence of those parts, her photographs did not paint a full picture of her life experience -- which was something I was trying to learn about through my research and why I asked for her participation.

Sea’s photographic collection demonstrated that she was observant about her surroundings and her experiences. A number of her photographs, like 177 (Figure 28) for instance, reflected her desire to see things from different perspectives or highlight the unusual in the ordinary within her life. She liked to investigate and discover things other

people may not have noticed. Her valuing of depth contributed to how some of her photographs were made.

Sea ~ I value depth in kind of like -- in a lot of ways: in relationships, and in exploring different places. It's hard to describe but just in general, I like focusing on details of things and going deep into learning about certain things and going to certain places and finding things that people wouldn't normally see there... and just trying to find meaning in different things.

Sea's practice of noticing things around her that others might not see hints at a longing to stand out, perhaps for an achievement, like making a photograph -- something over which she had control. Embracing her creative side Sea adopted a mindful approach in her photography, like in photograph 177 (Figure 28), in which she noticed that common dandelions gone to seed were quite eye-catching when she had a closer look at them.

Sea ~ I saw just this little tiny hill and it was just covered in dandelions and it was just so pretty... I've kind of really liked them lately. Usually you kind of just don't really notice them because they are so common, but they are cute.

Unlike the other participants, Sea titled her photograph files; the rest of the girls just used the numbers assigned by their cameras. This photograph was called "Wishes" and it seems to convey Sea's ability to look beyond the surface of things for deeper meaning - the dandelions can be seen as a field of wishes since children often blow the seeds away while making wishes.

I find this quotation and photograph from Sea somewhat metaphoric. Sea wanted to stand out and be noticed, a lot like Netra, and perhaps in the same way that Sea noticed



Figure 28. Photograph 177 ~ "Wishes" by Sea

the beauty in the field of dandelions upon closer inspection. Both girls engaged in practices that brought them attention in ways they felt comfortable, affording them some sense of power over why they were in the spotlight. Sea's in-depth and attentive approach to numerous aspects of her life shaped who she was as a person and also how she defined herself/her identity. Her desire to learn and think deeply about a subject was communicated through some of her photographs and in identifying this, she demonstrated that she knew herself fairly well.

It was not easy for Amanda to find words to describe her identity. She started by telling me "*Well, the first thing I think of is shy. I don't know... but it depends. I'm not always shy.*" She could not elaborate, or perhaps would not, and instead she used photographs like 134 and 135 (Figures 29 & 30) that she felt contained aspects of her identity to explain more about herself.



Figure 29. Photograph 134 ~ Amanda

The approach Amanda adopted when considering her photographs and her identity seemed quite literal, as she looked for concrete examples that represented aspects of who she felt she was. The avocado photograph (Figure 29) reminded her of a story about her brother and this helped her explain her sense of humour to me. The drawing of the crab on her ankle in photograph 135 (Figure 30) also provided evidence of her identity.

Amanda ~ *Like that one, 135 -- cause I'm Cancer... It shows that I like things like horoscopes... and that I am a Cancer. So it shows something about me... and I like patterned shoes... I like avocados. Even though that's not why I took the picture, but I do... I guess the ones that are of nature and stuff show that I like that.*



Figure 30. Photograph 135 ~ Amanda

As discussed in the literature review, identity is frequently changing and includes aspects of personality as well as someone's likes, dislikes, experiences, and influences from others. Amanda viewed her photographs looking for proof of these aspects. Since she knew the background of each image, she could select those that matched her ideas

about her own identity, despite the fact that they may not have revealed their meanings as easily to those interpreting them.

Also, it seemed that Amanda was having trouble finding the words to use to define her identity and instead used items and images to present how she viewed certain parts of herself. This suggests Amanda's identity was not something that could simply be defined using words or phrases but rather included intangible concepts that were learned through visual and verbal narratives. Amanda's verbal answers to the question "What is your identity?" did not divulge much about her, however when given the opportunity to use her photographs and their stories to answer this question, I felt as though I was getting a bit closer to discovering some of the identity elements of Amanda. This interaction, with Amanda using photographs to tell her story, emphasizes the importance of photographs as a mode of communication about self, as well as hinting at the depth of meaning held by the participants about their photographs. What may appear as a trite, superficial, almost thoughtless image to a viewer unfamiliar with the background of the photograph could contain significant meaning for the participant who is aware of the context or implicit meanings of it.

After viewing their collections, each participant was able to find images that she felt represented parts of who she was. They all agreed that it was not possible to know them fully just by looking at their photographic collections. Possibilities of misinterpretation did cause some anxiety for a few of the girls and that may explain their behaviour as active creators of their identities.

Identity: Constructing Identities to Avoid Misinterpretation

Being misunderstood was a concern for some of the participants. As discussed in chapter 6, Sea was hesitant to purchase a dress because she did not want to look like everyone else. Perhaps looking like everyone else would mean she would be misjudged as thinking or behaving like they did. Her apprehension about what other people thought about her was not unusual for a teenager and related to her understanding about identity, which included how you “*present yourself to the world.*” If Sea was concerned with how she presented herself to the world, then it seems that she was aware that the world may be judging her and (possibly mis-) interpreting who she was. In waiting to purchase a dress, or allowing time for feedback about photographs she had posted on Instagram, Sea was able to gauge how she would be interpreted by others when wearing the dress and act accordingly, consciously constructing her identity through this practice.

Netra also experienced concern about how other people might have thought about her and how she tried to promote a certain image of herself. As well, she stated that she was unable to experience certain moments fully because it was she who was taking the photographs -- for instance when at a family gathering or out with friends. She missed out on being in the moment as she tried to capture it.

Netra ~ *When I am with my friends -- in the photos of my friends, you couldn't -- you think they look like they are having fun and stuff but you couldn't really tell what I was [doing/feeling]. Well everyone else was there, and you could see only their faces and what they were feeling and everyone was laughing. And you couldn't -- you couldn't tell how I was laughing and everything.*

Although Netra had photographs from events with her friends, she was bothered by not being included in the visual documentation -- she was often behind the camera. Her smiles and behaviour were missing from the record. She seemed to be frustrated because she wanted to make the photographs but had to be absent from them in order to have them. *“Even if I take these pictures... I feel like I am the one who is -- I’m kind of missing out ...when I’m taking the pictures.”* Since she was not in the photographs of these social events, people viewing them may incorrectly assume she had not attended, or did not want to be shown. Netra’s frustration of being left out or not shown enjoying herself suggests that people may not get to know her in the way in which she would like them to. This indicates that actively creating her identity was paramount for Netra -- what other people saw/knew of her was orchestrated by her.

Netra’s apparent desire to be seen in a certain way by other people was evident when she spoke about photographs being unable to provide all the information (or at least what she felt was essential) about an event or herself.

Netra ~ *I guess it’s [a photograph] not the full [experience]. It’s like you go to a party and you only take pictures of when you get there and some with your friends, right? But you don’t know the whole party. Some people might take pictures of food, some people might take pictures of what you are wearing and it doesn’t justify everything. These pictures, they don’t have -- like it’s a video -- the picture doesn’t -- the pictures have meaning to them but it doesn’t capture everything. So like video...it takes some parts.*

Netra identified an important element of the way photographs communicate information to viewers and to herself: you cannot see the whole picture -- something is always cut out, missing, or purposefully omitted in order to create a certain image. Her astute observation

conveyed her concern that her own photographs, and perhaps ones taken by other people, would not show all that there was to see, leaving gaps about what you should know about her. Netra seemed to understand that who framed a photograph and how a subject was framed impacted its meaning. Netra was aware that the photographs she submitted were just a part of a whole view/moment/event that she had experienced.

Netra ~ When you are graduating, you only take a picture when you are there in the cap and everything but you don't have all the lessons you sat through and all the knowledge and everything... You can't really show all of that... just the one picture doesn't tell everything.

Her awareness of this brought the realization that what is seen in a photograph does not and *cannot* show the whole story. It also suggests that what is captured in that photograph may not be the most important elements that either the photographer or the subject may want you to see.

Identity: Family and Friends, Connections and Influences

Despite being absent in most of the participants' collections, family and friends played a significant role in the identity development of the girls. The desire to make connections to those with whom they shared interests and the decisions they made that were influenced by their peers and family members were clearly expressed in numerous conversations related to their images.

Amanda's collection did not contain any photographs of her family or friends, however her family, especially her mother's influence had made an impact on her photographic practice and her identity formation. It was because of her mother's interest in photographing sunsets that Amanda's participation in photography grew. Photographs

like number 10 (Figure 31) suggest that Amanda did want to capture the beauty of the sunset and at some level make a connection with her mother.



Figure 31. Photograph 10 ~ Amanda

Amanda ~ *She [Mom] is obsessed with sunsets! That's kind of what got me into more taking pictures of like -- sunsets for one thing, but then I kind of found more*

of what I like to take pictures of as well. But I still like to take -- this morning the sunrise was really, really pink so I was like "Ahh!"

+++

~ A lot of times my mom will be like "Oh, let's go to a beach near the ferry terminal because that will probably be a nice place for -- maybe the sunset will be good today" -- cause she always wants to take pictures of the sunset. So I'll take pictures of that but I'll also go around and take pictures of other things or of me or what I want to do.

These quotations from Amanda highlight aspects of her relationship with her mother. They also convey a sense of growing independence in Amanda, as she twice commented on how she took photographs of "*what I like to take pictures of*" besides the sunsets that her mother loves so much.

Family influences seemed to be one reason that Netra was attempting to construct her identity so she would stand out. She highlighted special achievements that made her different from the rest of her family. This may have been an attempt to distance herself from the "Netra" her family was familiar with -- the youngest daughter of three -- and create a new "Netra" who's attributes differed from her sisters and that brought her attention. She also wanted to be known for being unique, like when she mentioned she wanted to learn to use chopsticks and speak Asian languages so she would be seen as "*multi*"-dimensional and made up of things that make her special, and different from other people. Her behaviour seemed to give her mother some concern that she was going to either reject or lose her Indian cultural practices and "*become Chinese*". Netra's reassurance may have calmed her mother but it also suggests that she was not content with her identity as it was.

In addition to being noticed for her unusual talents or skills, Netra also wanted to make connections with certain communities with whom she shared a common interest.

Photograph 199 (Figure 32) shows one way that Netra tried to do this.



Figure 32. Photograph 199 ~ Netra

Netra ~ *Oh I'm in love with a K-Pop band and they do this [make the heart shape with their fingers] ... and I had so many photos of me doing this. This is what I was trying to do in 201 and 199 -- I placed the camera somewhere else and then I did the timer...K-Pop is Korean pop [music]. Yeah I really like it. I'm really -- Oh my god! I'm such a fan!... I like the lyrics and stuff...*

One reason that Netra selected this photograph was because she wanted to share with me (and the other KPOP fan group members perhaps) her love for the music she enjoyed so

much. This gesture was a way of communicating about her musical preferences and at the same time, making a link with the band by performing the gesture. It was a photograph to show loyalty to the music group and she intended it to look a certain way, as she stated she took “*so many photos of me doing this*”. In submitting this photograph for the research and sharing it with other people (on social media for instance) Netra was demonstrating how she took an active role in her identity formation. It suggests that she wanted to make certain things known about herself to other people -- shaping how they would think about her because of what they had seen in her photographs.

Making connections with the people around her was also essential for Sea. When she spoke about concepts that may not have been present in her photographic collection but related to her maturing sense of self she included: valuing depth, being open to other people, and feeling grounded. Together these concepts indicate that Sea placed a high level of importance on her relationships, especially when she considered how other people might understand her.

Sea ~ I guess just like being grounded and feeling like I belong and I'm somewhere that I want to be and need to be I guess. I don't know if that shows in the pictures but it's just something that is kind of important to me and that I strive for because I've moved around so much. That's something that I am always thinking about and kind of I get anxious over sometimes when I don't feel grounded and when I feel like I don't have connections with people -- I feel lost and kind of not alive, you know? That feeling... I don't know -- it's just something that I think about.

Sea's feeling of “*being grounded*” was clearly something that she found necessary and tried to “*strive for*” and I believe this is why she shared her feelings about this with me --

to contribute to my getting to know teenage girls' life experiences. She realized this was not something easily found in photographs, however it was something that is an essential part of her life. Feeling like she belonged and making social connections were significant for Sea and some of the other participants, because without these connections and/or a sense of grounded-ness she would not only miss out on friendships but she also realized that she would not feel well/healthy.

Another participant, Erin, shared a story that highlights a commonality between many of the participants: being accepted as part of a group of friends was an important part of their life experience and was a contributing factor in their identity formation. (Note: Erin was attending school in Canada to learn English, and while she was able to communicate with me fairly well, I have inserted the words that are not italicized to help maintain the clarity of the statements she made.) Erin's story began with her explanation about why Photograph 94 (Figure 33) was valuable to her.

Erin ~ *My birthday is March 25, a Thursday. In the morning I didn't go to my locker, so Riko sent me a message -- Please come to your locker. So I went and "Oh my goodness!" In Japan we just give birthday presents and cards but Riko did this! I was so happy! And I love balloons. This was the first time I had this done and so I was so happy! There were two of my friends sitting near the locker and everyone said "Happy Birthday!" I will do this for Riko's birthday.*

Erin's photograph of the locker fits well in a collection of teenage girls' photographs. Having friends decorate for and celebrate your birthday in this way was fairly common for students at her school, but for Erin this experience was quite different because she was not used to having such thoughtful and close friends, let alone having a

fuss made over her. By sharing this photograph Erin provided an opportunity to share her past experiences about friendship and growing up shy and often lonely.



Figure 33. Photograph 94 ~ Erin

Erin ~ *When I was ten years old I was alone. I was alone in school for too long but I, I couldn't talk about this to my mom. Because I didn't want her worrying about me. I didn't like myself because I couldn't talk with friends about anything. I didn't have a best friend. I had just friends, but not good friends. I couldn't talk about myself, and I couldn't talk about my worries. I would just listen. I was so nervous I didn't talk so then after school I talked too much with my mom. I talked*

*about school. About friends. About, everything. Mom just listened to my words.
But I didn't want my mom to worry about me.*

+++

~ When I was a junior high school student I entered a leadership program. I went to special events and we organized school festivals or sports festivals. When I finished leadership I thought "I've changed my feelings about myself". By then I had a best friend. And because I was feeling so good I decided to study abroad, here. Now I can talk about myself, and I can listen to my friends and I can help them, and my friends help me. It's a good relationship. I'm so different now.

When we started our research relationship I learned that Erin was shy. We met individually, even when Erin had become more familiar with some of the other participants. Her desire for friendship and belonging still existed but her own insecurities seemed to override her need for making a lot of friends. Erin's story about her anxiety and loneliness as a child helped me understand a bit about her developing identity. If Erin had not brought this photograph to my attention I would not have thought to ask questions about her shyness or experiences growing up. This line of questioning did not fit with any other photographs that Erin contributed, nor the topics of conversation stemming from her collection. This suggests that although Erin was able to share many things about her life experience through her photographic collection (e.g. her likes, and places she visited) certain elements of her identity were only revealed once her photographs acted as a catalyst for her to consider her maturity and developing identity.

Friendship and engaging with peers not only contributed to the participants' sense of belonging, but it influenced their identity formation. This engagement happened in a number of ways: through their comparisons with each other, like in Amanda's stories; by

working towards goals of improving themselves, like Erin; in developing independence, like another participant, Ashley, who travelled with three friends on a graduation vacation to southern California unaccompanied by adults. It was during this trip that Ashley realized how previous travel experience helped her feel comfortable being responsible for herself while her less experienced friends struggled a bit to cope with their new found freedom. When Sea said, “*when I feel like I don’t have connections with people -- I feel lost and kind of not alive, you know?*” her desire for friendship seemed to contribute to her ability to grow out of adolescence and come to know herself better.

Identity: Being “Right” & Fitting In

As discussed in the Appearance chapter, attempts to fit in to the social and cultural norms did occupy the participants to varying degrees. Not only was it important to construct an identity that others interpreted the “right” way (for instance, as the participants intended) but it also became apparent that the identities that they were constructing had to be the “right” kind -- reflective of how society demanded they behave, think, and look.

Sea discussed her struggle with how she was developing ethically as she matured into a young adult. She seemed to want to remain true to herself (perhaps because this is such a strong message in many post-feminism media) however what people around her thought of her had an impact on her engagement in the world.

Sea ~ ...it’s just hard to kind of find a balance and kind of find your own views on what is good and what is okay and what makes you kind of feel good and what you want to do and stuff like that... It’s hard -- I find it hard within just the past few years trying to find what is morally acceptable and trying to find your own

perception of that with all these different things you have to consider, like what people will think of you.

Sea seemed uncertain about how to consider the many opinions to which she was exposed, how other people might judge her, and how to reconcile her own feelings about “*what is good*”. Her consideration of concepts like morality helped me get to know her better and appreciate how she thought of herself. Later in the data collection period, Sea shared more aspects of her identity.

Sea ~ ... it takes a lot for me to open up to people fully and to feel comfortable enough around them to joke without having to overthink it kind of and just say what's on my mind -- because I do think about stuff too much I think. I care so much about what people think of me sometimes that I kind of way over-analyze stuff... I really want to kind of make sure that I say what I mean... or say it in a way that they would know. I guess I'm getting a lot better at not taking things that other people say personally or taking them in a way that they don't mean it I guess. Because that is something that really irritates me -- when people are really sensitive towards that. I understand when people -- how they interpret things differently but at the same time you have to be really open minded if you are going to be able to actually know what they mean... I think I am a lot better at not jumping to conclusions and judging people and stuff based on little things like that.

Sea recognized she was worrying less about what others thought about her and she had also realized that she should be less judgmental about those around her. Quite often in adolescent peer groups, judging and being judged are common ways to figure out how

you do or do not fit in to the groups' norms. Realizing that she did not have to judge others was a definite sign of maturity for Sea.

I have written at length about Amanda's struggle with her body image and weight issues in the previous chapters however, in addition to trying to change her appearance to feel better about herself, Amanda was also struggling fitting in to how she felt she should look and feel about herself. The discussions Amanda and I had were mainly about how she behaved to change her appearance and how she felt scared when she realized her thoughts resembled those of people she had seen on Tumblr who seemed to be very affected by their anorexia and bulimia.

These external messages, and ones like them presented in various media, had influenced Amanda for so long that it seemed like her self-esteem had become overshadowed by over-valuing her appearance. Being "right" in how she looked seemed to be what brought Amanda feelings of success, not how she felt about her achievements or skills. In the following quotation Amanda revealed how her self-esteem was directly connected to her body image.

Amanda ~ ... *For me this is not about other people looking at me differently. It's about me feeling better about myself, because -- just cause I sometimes I don't feel very good about myself. I don't know. I just thought that it would help me feel better if I felt that I looked better.*

Amanda exposed very personal and powerful feelings about what she valued in herself when she connected what she looked like to her self-worth. I do not think Amanda would have been able to share these ideas with me without first having shared her photographs and stories over many months and creating a trusting relationship. In addition to trusting

me with her personal photographs and stories, Amanda also provided the following poem which she composed for her English class and that accompanied her photographic essay.

The Pear

The little girl that loved to eat glanced away from her notebook
Imagining her life 7 years in the future.

At that moment sitting in her desk she would never have believed that the
dizzying feeling of an empty stomach at 3pm would one day make her feel so
good.

And how could she guess, sitting in class learning arithmetic that one day she'd
be using mathematics for self destruction?

Now 84 months have passed,

Each day 43,200 seconds of this girl's life is spent calculating:

"How much have I eaten?"

"How much can I lose?"

Looking back now the math that we learn in our single digit years seems to be so
easy

As simple as reaching for that cookie because it looks so good

Believe me.

That little girl, a little older, has been taught something new.

There's an infinite amount of positive integers, but the same can be said about
the negative ones too.

How could she ever have imagined that something so seemingly small such as
negativity would have the power to take over her innocent mind?

She says "If A squared plus B squared equals C squared, is there a way to be
what I see?"

Paired with a plan to factor out pie from the grocery line

She is determined to reduce the circumference of her thighs

Writing out calculations over and over has always helped her see things clearer

So she repeats her habits moreover "Don't eat, Don't eat" still no results in the
mirror

Yet the rate of change in her body is drastically real

Though others may not notice, there is a huge difference in how she feels

No energy, bruised skin, and an increasingly slow brain,

Her muscles never have enough fuel, and she's to blame.

She can't seek help

No one would believe her problem
"You see, she's simply too obtuse "
They say "only the acute ones practice self abuse."
But you'd be surprised to know how many people have fallen
The end behaviour of this disease is often rotten
The little girl that once loved to eat glanced away from her notebook
Filled with formulas, equations, word problems begging for a solution
"If Ana ran for two hours each day, how long would it take to horizontally
compress her waist?"
"If Mia consumes nothing but water until her knees give way, will it be easier to
make her stomach concave?"
"But what is the limit as x reaches zero?"
The question runs through her mind
She works out until there's no more calories to burn
Because she ate two yam fries
She knows one day everything will be easier
More simple than factoring a difference of squares
But that moment is for the future
Right now, no one hears her prayers
So she puts down the notebook
Leaves the cosines behind
And empties her body
One more time

I have included Amanda's poem in the section on identity, rather than in the appearance nexus because whether it reveals an autobiographical perspective or not, it provides a raw and realistic experience that many young women have shared. It also presents some startling concepts about when and how children begin to internalize media messages (Thin = Goal, Success, Pretty, Happiness, etc.) and how this could possibly shape their developing identity, as perhaps was the case for Amanda. Through her stories and photographs, Amanda's identity was revealed (to some extent) as well as evidence of her need for external validation. The messages Amanda received, through media, work colleagues, peers, and family created many (impossible?) standards for her to feel she had

to live up to. Over time, Amanda's belief in these societal norms shaped her own behaviour and thinking about herself. She became unable to distinguish between what she wanted (to be thin) and why she wanted it (she said being thin would make her feel better about herself) but why would being thin make her feel better? Because media (and other sources) had inundated her with this concept for years. Elements of Amanda's identity formation, examples of which have been presented here because of her photographic collection, draw attention to the ways external messages have influenced her to try and fit in. Without the photographs and our trusted relationship, it is unlikely I could have learned much about Amanda's identity.

Identity Nexus Summary

When given a chance to share her ideas about a photograph, more about the participant is learned, providing insight into how she sees and experiences her world, and perhaps how she finds her place within it. From the discussions about identity that I had with Netra it seemed that her identity was shaped by how she was seen and understood by other people and how closely this matched the "Netra" she intended for others to know. Amanda's data suggest that external messages matter a lot to her and had played a significant role in her developing identity. What other people thought about Sea (or the possibility of what they thought) created complications in her own self-knowledge and identity development.

These three participants' experiences and photographs highlight varying levels of self-awareness and identity development. Central to their process of learning who they were was wanting to "be right" and "fit in." These were two difficult concepts for them to define because the targets that they were aiming for were in flux, depending on the

context they were in and the company they kept; the indexicality of identity. Deciding on which elements of their identities that they wanted to forefront impacted how they portrayed themselves. Feedback and external messages about who they should be also strongly influenced what they thought about themselves, and how other people might have been thinking about them. The possibility of what others were thinking was seemingly a constant threat. Constructing and adjusting their identities were ongoing processes. A key aspect to their development seemed to be the reflexive practice in which they engaged -- involving re-viewing their photographs and re-narrating the stories related to them as they allowed for new self-knowledge to be discovered.

Findings and Initial Analysis Summary

“What are adolescent girls’ photographic nexuses?” is a question that really asks how do adolescent girls want to be understood? How do they want to share their life experiences? What do they value? Why do they make photographs? Individually the participants’ data provide many possible answers but when considered as a whole, larger collection key themes emerge that indicate central connections exist.

I have identified control as the principle nexus for these adolescent girls. The participants wanted control over how they were understood by others. They wanted to take control in their lives. They felt controlled by societal pressures, norms, and fears of fitting in. What they did not seem to demonstrate was a strong understanding of the ways in which media controlled them. Control permeated nearly all aspects of the girls’ lives, evident in their photography and interviews; revealing how they viewed and understood the world, and how they lived their lives. In addition to control the significant nexuses

that emerged from the findings include appearance, identity, and social media.

Fundamental to the existence of these nexuses were the girls' photographic practice, their photographic tools, and social media. Their practice and tools afforded them ways to capture moments, relive events as memories, and reflect and present facets of their world that they felt had value, questioned, and/or supported.

As each nexus was analyzed further themes arose, providing more insight as to the ways in which the girls' photography impacted their lives, and how their lives impacted their photography. The social media nexus showed that the girls used social media as a space to connect with communities. They were exposed to social and cultural standards and they used social media as a way to explore how they fit in to those standards, if they even wanted to. The data also uncovered examples of and reasons for the girls' resistance to elements of social media, which often stemmed from lack of control. This was especially true in relation to their photographic practice to do with selfies. The appearance nexus included the girls' rationale for how and why they altered their appearance. This chapter also introduced the concept of fetishization as a practice adopted by the participants as they viewed and re-viewed their bodies, their photographs, and images in media. In addition to how the girls looked at themselves, they also exposed aspects of control connected to their appearances through habits they performed, often because their fear or anxiety of being misunderstood or misrepresented was a concern. This anxiety is closely tied to a lack of control over how others saw (and often judged) them. In the identity nexus chapter, many links to control, appearance and social media can be seen. The participants defined identity and connected visual clues in their photography to their own identities. Certain practices that the girls implemented seemed to suggest conscious and unconscious construction of how they wanted others to interpret their identities. The

influence of the participants' families and friends on the girls' developing identities was noted in the data, as were some ways in which the girls attempted to assess their ability to fit in and/or stand out when they felt it was necessary.

As stated in the findings introduction, photography contributed to the emerging identities of the participants in critical ways. Taking pictures was a common and daily habit for the girls and they engaged in this habit for a variety of reasons: to record, explore, and disclose certain ideas about themselves and others, their experiences, and to control some part of the world. At times reactionary, instantaneous, pre-planned, artful, and/or private or public, the participants' photographic collections, coupled with their interviews and focus group contributions, highlight the importance of visual communication for young women in a variety of situations. Examination of the data show the depth of meaning that any one of the photographs could contain.

Chapter 8: Analysis & Discussion

Introduction

Woven throughout the participants' lives are the themes of appearance, identity, and control. Unravelling their attempts at trying to look the right way, behave the right way, and think the right way are hetero-normative societal norms put in place by hegemonic corporatized institutions, one of the strongest of these being post-feminism. Post-feminism works with the corporatization of youth through mass and social media to prescribe how women and young girls should be and to create idols for them to follow and model. Initial analysis how of the girls' photography, stories, and lives intersect in various nexuses was described in the previous findings chapters. In this chapter, the analysis focuses on how post-feminism and media erode the developing identities, self-worth, and photography of the participants, and potentially many young women in our society.

Using post-feminism as a starting point, I considered the nexuses from a more holistic perspective and as I reviewed the topics in chapters 5 - 7 several significant issues drew my attention. With further inquiry into both the data and societal dynamics, I was able to make connections between what I knew about the girls' lives from the data and how they were influenced by the long arms of post-feminism. These connections became the themes around which this discussion is shaped. The themes discussed below include: mass media's aesthetic obsession, fabricated authenticity, genderizing, the gaze, and composed lives. I will now introduce each theme briefly and then explain how they are interrelated before they are explored in more detail below.

Mass media's aesthetic obsession refers to the endless ways in which mass media places an extremely high value on appearance, over all other personal qualities. It is in

this distorted context that the participants have grown up, and have become educated about how they should consider their own appearance. Fabricated authenticity contributes to the unrealistic context in which the participants live. What they see around them in media is not an accurate representation of much of the world, especially people's appearances. The constructed nature of what is supposedly authentic teaches the girls what to value and these values come from impersonal, commercial sources. In addition, the participatory nature of social media encourages altering visual texts, through free software and applications that are readily accessible and easy to use without specialized training. The genderizing of youth occurs as they are encouraged to fit in to the gendered norms and standards that they are faced with in society, throughout mass media's implicit and explicit communication. The gaze refers to how the participants developed a deep-rooted habit of looking out/at the world and then were prompted, usually by mass media, to turn the gaze on themselves to see how they measured up. The theme of composed lives highlights the process in which the participants created themselves to be "right" in that they mirrored the lives of those they viewed in mass media and around them. What was shown in their photographs and told in their stories reflected much of the post-feminist rhetoric that they had learned. What really mattered to them, like their families, music, and their accomplishments at school and work, were absent from their photographic collections, and not shared through social media, so not shared as part of their public, online identities.

These themes are strongly interconnected. One pathway through them could be explained by starting with mass media's aesthetic obsession. The high demand to look a certain way causes a fabricated authenticity to be put forth by nearly everyone, from independent youth to corporate marketing firms. This contrived authentic-ness also builds

the gendered notions that mass media's audience should be striving to reach. Because of mass media's fascination with appearance the audience is drawn to gaze outwardly looking for what they want to see, and inwardly -- objectifying themselves as media has objectified others as a model for their behaviour. All of this looking and being looked at causes a version of a life to be shared publically, often on social media. This path does neatly explain how these themes can explain the influence mass media and post-feminism have on society however it is critical to mention that the path can be far more complicated than it is presented here. For the participants in this research, certain themes were more prevalent than others and the order in which the themes were expressed through the data varied depending on the girl and her experiences. These themes attempt to explain how post-feminism inveigles media rhetoric, dissuades critical examination of media messages and negatively impacts female youth.

Mass Media's Aesthetic Obsession

There are numerous examples in the findings that suggest mass media strongly influenced how the participants lived their lives: how they wanted to appear to others and themselves (e.g. Netra's daily routine application of make-up); how they thought about themselves (e.g. Amanda thought she would feel better by becoming thinner); what they valued (e.g. their appearance evidenced by the numerous selfies submitted from various participants); and how they communicated (e.g. Sea's conflicted feelings about having to use Facebook to keep in touch with friends but never really developing depth in those relationships). The post-feminist messages embedded within mass media create an insidious, subtle, pervasive, and persuasive forum in order to promote a "consumer citizenship" (McRobbie, 2011, p. 182) in which self-love and self-loathing are both

normalized. This effect is evident for many of the girls, and it is particularly visible in Amanda's story of possible body dysmorphia. "Consumer citizenship" harnesses the power of popular culture and media and suggests that a consumer-focused life is both desirable and preferred (McRobbie, 2011, p. 182). The offerings of media are purposefully limited -- especially those of a visual nature -- and overly emphasize outer appearance. This is true in many forms of media: magazines, television, movies, music videos, and advertisements.

Special K's new advertising campaign #OWNIT (Special K Canada, 2015) includes a television commercial that has been viewed nearly five million times. It begins with a female voice explaining "Fact -- 97% of women have an 'I-hate-my-body-moment' every single day" as images of women of a variety of shapes, sizes, ethnicities, and abilities fidget and fuss with their clothing in front of mirrors. A staggering "fact" that lead me to wonder if it is really true. I not only questioned how this statistic came to be, but also if I was one of the 97%. And, what constitutes "hate"? I admit to being annoyed at myself on a frizzy hair-day but would I use "hate" to describe how I felt? This word, coupled with images of women's body parts that were not the norm for most advertising -- in that they did not show stick-thin, white, young, photo-shopped women -- seems to encourage a dislike of how one should feel about her body -- quite the opposite intention of this campaign. The suggestive nature of this introductory statement in the commercial placed doubt in my mind about a topic that I had not formally considered and to be honest, I was slightly shaken. Shaken at being drawn into this way of thinking (I think I should know better than to be duped by media messages!) and also shaken because if I, a mature, critically-minded, feminist, could be drawn in to this way of thinking about

myself, what kind of damage could this be doing to young girls, who might not be so aware of media's ulterior motives.

The voice goes on to explain, "We can change something more important than the size of our butt -- we can change our perspective. What if we tell that little voice inside that tells us we aren't good enough to shut up!" while mirrors break in a number of settings: at the pool, in a wedding dress shop, at home in a bedroom. These sites of violent shattering remind the viewer of the places where they probably do engage in negative thinking about themselves, perhaps in an attempt to normalize the experience -- as if to say "We all feel bad when we put on a bathing suit! Everyone looks fat in a sample-sized wedding dress! You are doing it right!" Women are then encouraged to be "Perfectly imperfect and take a good long look in the mirror at the good and not so good and proudly own it all." Despite the idea that women should accept their bodies for what they are -- which is an inclusive and self-empowering message -- rather than trying to change them to meet impossible goals, the implicit meaning of this campaign is that your outer appearance -- how you see yourself and how others see you -- is essentially vital in how you feel about yourself. Asking women to "Own it all" including their imperfect parts, still invites comparison and competition between those who have more "imperfect" bits and those who do not. I wonder why (and when) media has been given the power to decide what a "perfect bit" looks like? This double-edged sword of feel-good advertising is often embraced for its explicit messages while the implicit messages are lost or unheeded.

The participants' photographic collections included many self-portraits and selfies. A few admitted to taking photographs of themselves to see how they looked, which suggests a process of self-evaluation. I wonder to what standards are they

measuring themselves up? By sharing these photographs in the research the girls knew that they would be made public, and it is for this reason I assume they felt comfortable and/or satisfied with how they looked in the photographs, seemingly conveying their acceptance of their appearance in that frozen moment and also success in their self-evaluation. On the contrary, their interviews revealed that they held insecurities and that media and cultural exemplars (regardless of how contrived they were) had caused them.

Fabricated Authenticity

The research findings demonstrate that the girls' appearance influenced their identities (and their identities influenced their appearances), which were expressed through their photographs, often on social media. Often, their interview words strongly contrasted with messages portrayed in their photographic collections. The disconnect between how the girls said they thought about themselves, and what their images presented about themselves is not limited to only the participants in this research. The visual representations in mass and social media present a false reality and create a desire for attention based on images that are more fiction than fact. "All images, despite their relationship to the world, are socially and technically constructed (Harper, 1998, p. 29" (Taylor, 2002, p. 124). This realization is not lost on all young people, especially those heavily involved in creating their online identities.

Essena O'Neill, an Australian model, quit Instagram recently and made headlines for doing so. O'Neill deleted over 2000 posts that, in her opinion, "served no real purpose other than self-promotion" (Hunt, 2015). She re-captioned the rest of her images with what she considered to be truthful accounts of how her photographs came to be bringing to light the hundreds of shots she took until she had the "right" one, the body altering

clothing she wore, the extreme dieting she practiced, and the corporate support she received to show particular products or include certain hashtags to encourage her followers to try those products. In calling attention to the ways in which O'Neill felt she was manipulating her followers she also highlighted her position as an "enactor of multiple discourses" (Deluca, 1999, p. 340) -- as a representative of the discourses in popular culture that reinforce only certain appearances, dieting behaviours, Photoshopped photography, and consumeristic habits. An example of one of O'Neill's Instagram posts is shown in Figure 34.

O'Neill felt so strongly about the deception in which she participated that she launched a website in an effort to rebrand herself as a healthy, vegan, creative young woman. Her Instagram Post re-captioning and website launch could be labeled as acts of resistance as she attempted to withdraw from the post-feminist rhetoric and media institutions in which she had become entangled. She described Instagram as "contrived perfection made to get attention" (Hunt, 2015) and hoped to expose the artificial nature of how some users manipulated their followers, mainly for attention and money.

The participants who did contribute to Instagram through viewing and posting did not have more than half a million followers, like O'Neill. However their desire for attention and their comparisons between themselves and societal models stemmed from the post-feminist ideas O'Neill, and others like her were promoting; couched in phrases like "Be your best self!" overlaid onto images of unhealthily thin women dressed in the latest fashions. The 500 000+ followers of O'Neill also demonstrate that there were many people who were interested (if not inspired) to follow her directions (which were provided through her clothing, make-up, hair styles, product inclusion etc.) in her posts.



Figure 34. Example re-caption post from O'Neill's Instagram (Source: The Guardian.com)

This point reminds me of Netra's friends and sisters encouraging her to contribute her own beauty rituals and examples to social media in order to show off how well she had achieved the accepted look. The awareness and critical evaluation of how media portrays women and the unreachable standards they are expected to live up to were recognised to

some extent by some of the participants, nevertheless, their struggle to fit in overruled their knowledge that they could never really achieve the goals being presented to them.

Genderizing

The aesthetic obsession of and false realities found in media also generate convincing gender archetypes. As seen in the findings, the participants were genderized -- a term I use to describe the compulsory rules and regulations society demands of children, and those raising them, so they “fit” into the standard traditional concepts of what it means to be either a boy or a girl -- and this binary is finite. There is little to no room for anyone who deviates from these rules or expectations, and for the children who do, their parents become either vilified or martyred depending on which media outlet is sharing the story. For those who do not want to follow these traditional rules or for those who find themselves not fitting in, there is little forgiveness. There are also very few examples in popular media of people who are going against these demands, so children lack role models and figures to emulate and who reflect how they feel, look, or think.

Genderizing can be explicit, for instance in the case of Disney and its many princesses who predominantly need a male character to help them solve their problems and save the day; or more implicit, as in advertisements like the one shown below -- Figure 35: I’m so Fancy! -- in which a young girl was photographed to show sequined leggings but because of the direction/marketing strategies used, she looks more like she is modelling a lifestyle for older teenagers or even adult women. Her lipstick, pout, and hand on her hip also show how she has been sexualized. To give the company the benefit of the doubt one might suggest that her “pretend sex appeal” is done ironically or in jest, to catch the audience’s attention since it is unusual to see a child portrayed in this way.

This ironic use of the concept that “sex sells” is a predominant theme in post-feminist media. What is dangerous about this kind of advertising is that children viewing it may learn behaviours that are simply inappropriate, perhaps because they do not understand irony, or critical thinking for that matter. Even if this child was not posed in such a way, there are still numerous rules being communicated about how a young girl should look.



Figure 35. Advertisement from Labowbowbaby.com website

The child in this photograph was photographed to show off her leggings, but as stated above, the rest of her outfit, hairstyle, make-up, and body positioning all indicate either her own knowledge of -- or her direction to -- present a more mature image. Children viewing this photograph would not only be exposed to clothing that suggests a particular message -- that being fancy is desirable -- but that certain body positioning and facial expressions should go along with that message. The danger comes from their potential misunderstanding of what other messages their body positioning and facial expressions also might say about them. “Gendered notions also profoundly affect our sense of who we are and who we become” (Heilman, 1998, p. 182). The participants rarely spoke about how they presented themselves as young women but their photographs suggest they had internalized post-feminist instructions of how to behave as a female teenager.

The Gaze

Societal standards (or should I say media’s standards -- because that is predominantly where the standards were consumed and produced by the participants) create tension in the girls’ lives about how they should look, behave and think and they are constantly accessible. These anxieties affected the girls’ interactions and connections with their peers and family members. (I remind you of Netra’s habit of keeping her family waiting while applying her make-up or Amanda’s mother begging her to eat one piece of twizzler licorice.) They provoked doubt about what others may have thought of them and caused them to worry about how they measured up to cultural stereotypes. Because what it means to be right or to match up with society’s norms seems to be in a state of flux, the notion of identity that was forming for the girls must also have been shifting and this

likely caused confusion. Post-feminism permits, if not invites or expects, a “self obsession” which leads to “inner-directed self competition”(McRobbie, 2015, p. 15). A perfect example of this self-scrutiny is the selfies phenomenon.

As mentioned in Chapter 6: The Appearance Nexus, a process of fetishization occurs from within when creating selfies. Selfies are an example of the traditional Male Gaze as it has become legitimized and encouraged through mass media’s portrayal of women. Just as mass media directs and controls so much of what we see in our society, the male gaze also controls how we should be seeing each other. In a published interview with Roberta Sassatelli, Laura Mulvey reflected on her pivotal article about film theory and gaze from 1975, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. During the interview, Mulvey reinforced the idea that the male gaze is more complex than simply men looking at, and desiring, women. “RS: The male gaze is also the female gaze -- namely that women look at themselves through the male gaze... LM: Yes, yes exactly, that is the absolutely crucial point” (Sassatelli, 2011, p. 127). In Mulvey’s original article she stated, “In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness” (Mulvey, 1975, p. 11). Mulvey’s comments from 1975 seem to have foretold the routine behaviour that Sassatelli identifies, and this is the behaviour in which the participants engaged as they observed, critiqued, altered, and presented certain versions of themselves. The versions the participants put forth were never explicitly for males, or others -- many of the girls stated they did it for themselves - - however, it is implicit in their behaviour that so much of what they do is related to how other people will see, and judge them.

Rather than seeking ideals in media that reflect who they want to be, the participants' selfies were examples of their own gaze (Mulvey, 1975) turned inward. Just as "the cinema poses questions of the ways the unconscious (formed by the dominant order) structures ways of seeing and pleasure in looking" (p. 7) the making and viewing of selfies also comprises its own set of procedures. Sea's comment about not sharing some of her selfies because they were taken "*just to see what I looked like that day*" refers to one of the acceptable ways in which selfies are used and how her own gaze is paramount in this photographic behaviour. Because of the heavy influence of how young women should look that is spread across many forms of media, it is likely that they are effected by what they have come to know. Whether kept for themselves to compare for future "self-regulation" (McRobbie, 2015, p.17) or shared on social media to show their attempt to fit in, selfies also house self expressions of gender -- expressions that are formed based on how they were doing gender, and how they had gender done to them. (Butler, 1999).

Composed Lives

What the girls shared on social media, whether it was Facebook, Instagram or other sites that encouraged "prosumer" (Tapscott & Williams, 2006) behaviour, often caused their lives to appear small, nonsensical, and even mundane. Yet they were driven to contribute. A recent social media phenomenon called #FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out) added pressure to their already complicated lives and emphasized the importance of their public personas. #FOMO is the worry that if one does not attend an event but instead stays home or goes to work, they will miss out on exciting, unforgettable, unrepeatable experiences. This fear or anxiety is often prompted by posts by peers on social media sites

that show them having the time of their lives. Not only was there a pressure on the participants to make sure their lives appeared to be a certain way, but there was considerable rehearsal in creating the photographic evidence to support that life they were supposed to be living. For example, Netra commented about the many images she had to make before one “*came out good*” and Sea and Amanda both used post-production techniques (e.g. filters and cropping) to create photographs that were deemed acceptable to share publically.

The girls constructed their online posts and other public iterations so that their lives became censored -- sharing only what they deemed to be appropriate -- that which matched what they thought they should be like. This construction suggests they were taking control over how they viewed themselves, and to some extent this is true, but I would argue that this is what post-feminism and mass media enticed them into thinking. The aspects of control and power relations in the girls’ lives were complex and muddled. They were exploring their own identities through their actions, appearance, and thoughts but these were all influenced by external messages. Their photographs and stories told of their need to appear in a certain way, often as they stated for their own comfort. They took control of their lives through constructing how they appeared but at the same time they had the outside influence of mass media overtly and covertly directing their thinking. at the same time as they girls exerted control over their own identities, post-feminism also had power over the girls.

In Heilman (1998), Foucault states that in modern society power can be hard to recognize because

A relationship of power is that mode of action which does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead it acts upon their actions” (Foucault, 1983, p. 229).

A form of power is being enacted on these girls, which leads them to an unhealthy preoccupation with themselves as objects. Yet they have an illusion of making free choices. (p. 199)

The participants' photographs and stories seemed to convey the idea that they could think and be and do whatever they wanted but they did not realize the box in which they lived nor did they realize how that box had been built through post-feminist mass media messages. An "illusion of control" (McRobbie, 2015, p. 4) had been crafted while simultaneously they girls did have power in their lives. We cannot assume the participants were entirely indoctrinated into post-feminist and mass media norms. The girls made choices: about how they lived their lives, about whether to record aspects of their lives in their photography, and whether to share those photographs. They opted in and out of norms and standards provided for them by society on a daily basis, as we all do. Sea's discussion about her clothing is an example of this. She struggled over the decision not to buy a dress that would have made her look like everyone else but at the same time, showed up to our interviews in a outfit commonly seen throughout the halls of her high school (leggings, baggy sweater, t-shirt and messy hair bun). The complexity of post-feminist rhetoric includes the occasional acceptance of messages and ideals that are offered by mass media and post-feminism, sometimes with an acknowledgement of its source and other times ignoring where the messages have originated. The negotiations and contradictions about how to live show the paradox in the girls' photographs and interviews and they reinforce the presence of post-feminism and other lenses for these young women. As previously mentioned, post-feminism needs feminism to exist, and likewise mainstream mass media can only be mainstream with alternative, or fringe options available as well.

Analysis and Discussion Summary: Damaged but not Broken

The damaging effects of post-feminism and mass media can be viewed in the girls' photographs and heard in their stories. By broadening my analysis of their experiences to include examples from mass and social media I argue that it is not just my participants who were enveloped in the media-presented reality but many young women. Media and society's overemphasis on appearance leads to strict guidelines as to how girls should exist, examine themselves, and engineer their public and private lives in real-world and online spaces. In this research, what I saw was the participants' best representation of their lives through their photographs. What their photographs documented was often a misunderstanding and/or misrepresentation of their independence and in turn, their identities.

The participants in the study were intelligent, thoughtful, kind, unique individuals but as I was searching for their authentic voices what I heard was post-feminist propaganda coupled with teen angst and self-doubt. How will they contribute to society when society has led them to this? Despite the negative effects being present, the participants did exhibit strength, courage, and resistance at times. The girls certainly shared what is considered normal teenage behaviours (teen angst and self-doubt being just two examples) but they also demonstrated ways in which they were taking control over aspects of their lives and becoming empowered by their experiences. Were mass media and post-feminist messages the only sources of guidance these girls had to learn how to be in the world, I would worry about how they would mature into adulthood with few values and morals however within their photography and stories is evidence that their family interactions, membership in clubs and bands, peer relationships, attendance of

school and other community groups, and their own developing independence have all contributed alternative messages to counter some of the hegemonic ideals that they faced.

Chapter 9: Conclusions, Implications, Future Considerations



Figure 36. Photograph 138 ~ Sea

Introduction

Just as Sea has presented photograph 138 (Figure 36) with a view of herself from her own perspective, the purpose of this final chapter is to share what I have learned from this research and explain its importance, from my perspective. Initially I will highlight the collected learnings I have gathered after finishing the data review, analysis and discussion. I will discuss the implications these learnings could have for educators or other adults working with youth and photography. Next, I will think ahead to future possibilities that could build on this research and finally I will offer some reflective thoughts as this journey comes to a close.

Collected Learnings

Female Adolescents are Missing

Female adolescents in many ways are not heard from, whether it is in the ways they are represented in media by adults who tend to stereotype them, or in how they are treated as a single entity, which ignores the differences among them, their voices are not heard. This ongoing discounting provides evidence that along with not being heard, female adolescents are not valued. They have limited opportunities to make contributions (in school, out in the community, with family, or at work) and it is rare to find examples in media about girls' accomplishments outside of a high grade point average or a win in a sporting event, despite the fact that many girls are involved in a plethora of activities beyond the classroom or gymnasium. One reason girls' contributions are not valued is perhaps because they are not often given the opportunity to talk or share their ideas and opinions. A lack of opportunities to contribute sends a strong message that they must have nothing of value to say. When adolescent girls do offer something, adults frequently take their stories from them, re-narrating them and re-interpreting them. Adults take control of their stories, re-authoring them. Finally in telling their stories, the girls are not provided with the tools they need to truly express their experiences, ideas, and opinions. Catch-all words like *cool*, *stuff*, and *weird* are substituted for what the girls actually mean, partially because this is what is expected to be heard from adolescents and partially because they are not taught the language they need to clearly share what they mean.

Female adolescents are missing: missing a chance to be heard, missing being valued by themselves and others, missing opportunities to talk, missing control over their own stories, and missing the tools and language they need to tell their stories. As shown

by these data many of these issues stem from a central nexus of control; a concept with which we all struggle, and for these girls orienteering their way through adolescence -- a period of life-discovery, identity formation, and increased self-knowledge -- a nexus to which many of their photographs, stories and other nexuses are connected.

Complexities of Life as an Adolescent Girl

A key concept that emerged from this research is that it is not easy being a teenage girl. The conflicts, anxieties, and pressures that exist encompass everything from what she wears, what she says, how she performs her femininity and self, to how she is perceived by others and how she creates her identity and how it is seemingly created for her others. An adolescent girl's life is particularly difficult because she in fact has multiple identities that she must present in a variety of sites in order to create a cohesive self -- a self that meets the criteria set by external traditions and rules which are often internalized, sometimes without her being aware of them.

This research has brought forth knowledge of the ways in which social media is woven into the life experiences of the participants, and how their life experiences are constructed on social media. Social media can be a place to feel welcomed (like on Facebook with friends); a place in which to learn (like on Tumblr when looking for healthy examples of how to live); or a place that can be damaging (like on Instagram when other people's opinions provide one with a false sense of accomplishment). Through the girls' reported use of social media, and in reviewing their photographic practice, I came to discover that self-regulation and self-evaluation have become normalized for them. And these behaviours are not the only normalized aspects of the girls' lives that I uncovered -- there is a strong post-feminism theme that is imbedded

within the popular media, social media and societal messages to which the participants were exposed, and in which they were participating.

Research Implications

Because of what this research has shown, in relation to social media, post-feminism, adolescent girls' photographic practices, and identity development, educators and other adults working with this population must take into account the traditional silence that this group has felt and invite and encourage ways for them to be seen and heard. Not only do I recommend that all youth be exposed to the critical literacies that will help them better navigate the media messages that they are engaging with, but especially important are the concepts related to equity and social justice that are missing from the current themes in media. Inviting young women to question their life experiences from a critical perspective and providing safe places where they can share their ideas in a variety of media formats (through spoken, written, and visual texts) offers them the chance to learn about themselves and about the harm being done to them by external influences. Perhaps equally as important is providing opportunities for young women to partake in their own acts of resistance against the hegemonic customs society has adopted and making them aware of, and perhaps connect with, those who are also undertaking challenges to the status quo.

Future Possibilities

Along with my criticism of post-feminism I call for a renewal or redefining of feminisms. Currently, post-feminism's association with big business and global media has caused feminism to be misconstrued, as it has become associated with corporations,

advertising, and consumerism. Feminism in the media today is presented as a bastardization of its past movements -- references to women fighting for equality are met with arguments that women can be mothers and have careers too, and the like. However, the oppression of women has gone underground in much of mass media, because of the post-feminist undermining. The emphasis on individualism may be producing capable, can-do, women who do juggle family, work, social life, and more with ease, but it potentially drives away a sense of community and responsibility to our fellow citizens. Those who excel at being good on their own end up silencing those who need support to be heard because they have no one offering that support to them. In addition to questioning how post-feminism is harming society, it is essential to wonder “What is feminism today? What should it be?”

After conducting a focus group with the participants to gather stories about their experiences related to feminism, it became quite clear that they were informed as to what many of the traditional aims of feminism were (e.g. fighting for women to be allowed to vote, and stopping sexism), but unsure as to how it existed today, especially in relation to their own lives. I believe that future research stemming from this work could include an investigation into the ways in which young women are enacting feminism in the current climate of post-feminism and why these unrecognized feminist undertakings are important not just for women, but for all people.

Another possible path of investigation would be to engage more deeply into the methodology and practice of arts-based photographic research and connect it to elementary curriculum. Schools tend to value and prioritize written texts over visual and oral ways of knowing. Given the data in this research, I find it clear that photographs can be revealing, artistic sites of knowledge. Future work could involve creating curriculum

that encouraged more emphasis photographic expression, or developing Professional Development materials that help teachers better understand how they can embrace visual texts as part of the ways their students show their learning, or working with existing curriculum to find learning outcomes that afford themselves to photography. There is also the possibility of developing a course for teacher education students or current educators that would allow them to explore photography and find ways to connect it to their teaching future practice.

Finally, this research can contribute to and lead to further work in the area of Girlhood studies. The close ties the participants had to social media, the ways in which mass media and societal norms infiltrated the decisions they made about how to exist in their world, and the impact of intense visual modelling of lifestyles, body images, and peer-group goals are all worthy of further investigation. Feminism's influence and post-feminism's impact are also possible themes that could be explored to bring light to the examples in which young women are performing acts of relinquishing and resisting.

Final Developments

In the narrative that opened this dissertation, you met a younger version of me. Someone who worried about fitting in and looking the right way while at the same time felt a uprising of independence growing within her. I wondered about my girl-training and tried to fit myself into a box of which I did not know the limits -- only that I would know if I had crossed them. Yet moving through this this period of confusion and contradictions (otherwise known as adolescence) I was able to develop inner strength, critical awareness of the messages society was giving me, and as I previously mentioned, a feminist perspective from which I viewed and lived my life. These qualities were fostered in me

because I was supported at home and in other environments, such as in school and other groups to which I belonged. I received encouragement to do my best, to share my opinions, to explore and question the world around me, and to learn from my successes and failures. As I consider the girls with whom I worked, and young women like them, it is my hope that they will continue have opportunities in which they can be heard, be encouraged, and experiment without harsh judgment so they can develop strength and confidence in themselves.

While I developed relationships with the girls in this research, I saw many of my own teenage anxieties reflected in their photographs and stories. I saw and heard their struggles and enjoyment with school, friends, family, and extra curricular activities, and silently reminisced about the way I spent my time when I was a teen. The similarities between us allowed me to gain their trust and confidence that I would honour their photography and their stories in my research. How these girls differ from my own adolescence is their ability to be able to capture so much of their lives in photographs. “To collect photographs is to collect the world” (Sontag, 1973, p. 1). Now, as I come to the end of this educational path, I find myself considering the impact their photographs have had in my life, and how, as Sontag suggested, I have collected a little part of their world, as a feminist act of resilience against post-feminism and as a way to help others get to know and value these girls’ use of photography as a means of better understanding their lives.

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Appendix A

The following are descriptions of the participants who contributed valuable data to this research, however they were not included in much of the main findings section due to space and themes discussed.

Ashley

Ashley is 17 and the oldest of five children in a blended family. She is used to having lots of people around her; at home and in her peer group. She considers herself very social and an extrovert. Ashley is in her last year of high school and she is quite active in the school community, leading the drum line, playing in the band, and recently joining the curling team. Ashley enjoys how photography “*speaks to her*” and tries to take photographs from “*different angles.*” Capturing a “*certain moment of time*” is part of her photographic practice. Ashley’s interest in photography stems from her childhood experimenting with a small point-and-shoot camera.

Ever since I was really little I kinda wanted to be a photographer... I really wanted to take -- nature photos are always what I wanted to do ... and I just really liked taking... taking that moment and kind of like taking a picture of it and always having it. I really love memories and I love going over things so that's why I would always take pictures... I would always take like photos of anything to go over again. And a lot of really -- up close -- and I never knew why I liked to do that but I really liked to see things really, really close up.



Photograph 177 ~ Ashley (From her trip to Southern California)

Erin

Erin is 16 years old and in grade 11. She is a visiting exchange student from Japan and although she refused to meet with the rest of the participants as a group, she was happy to meet with me individually. In Japan, Erin lives with her parents and she has two brothers and a sister. She is the youngest. During this year abroad, Erin told me that she takes photographs for a specific reason- to share with her family. *“I want to memorize -- I want*

to show some things. My mom, Japanese mom -- can't go, come to Canada so I wanted something, I wanted to tell her all the things." Since coming to Canada and starting high school Erin has discovered that she loves to cook. She is taking a Cooking class and many of her photographs are of food that she has made or that she is trying when going out with friends.



Photograph 92 ~ Erin

Joyce

Joyce is 15 years old and the youngest of the participants. She lives with her grandparents, her mother and older sister. Recently they adopted a puppy and Joyce likes

photographing him. Joyce shares her photographs with her family, usually her grandmother, *“because she was a photographer and pretty much, like pretty much my inspiration I guess for my photography -- but I’ve always like photography cause... I’ve always thought it was really cool.”* She uses a digital SLR Canon for her photograph *“cause I can edit things better, on the computer and just -- the amount of creativity is better.”* She tries to use the manual settings to make her photographs look the way she wants them to, rather than how the camera’s auto settings decide. Apart from photography, astronomy is a big interest for Joyce. *“When I can -- when it’s not super cold out I sometimes bring my tripod and try to take photos of stars and stuff too, like astro-photos.”*



Photograph 62 ~ Joyce (An example of how she “plays with” the settings to get her photographs to look the way she wants, rather than using the camera’s auto feature)

Lori

Lori is 17 and nearly finished high school (in grade 12). She enjoys photography although there is not a working camera in her home at the moment. She often borrows her father's camera, however he recently moved out so she has limited access to it. Lori now lives with her mom and younger brother. She is heavily involved in music and sports. She spends a lot of time outdoors -- playing softball or skiing -- and nature is her preferred subject for her photography.

If I were to just grab a camera and go somewhere to take pictures I would definitely just go straight to the beach. But if not, I don't know. It's all fairly outdoorsy stuff, like I prefer to take pictures of nature or whatever outside.

Lori submitted the fewest photographs to the research and attended the fewest interviews, however she did come to both focus group discussions at the end of the data collection process. She attempted to share some photographs she had made using her boyfriend's phone camera but slow Internet prevented her from sending them.



Photograph 37 ~ Lori

Riko

Riko is 17 years old and visiting Canada as an exchange student from Japan for a year. She has lived abroad before, in Australia, and traveled to the United States and Canada on school trips in the past. In Japan Riko lives with her parents and is the middle child of three. She usually uses her sister's camera when practicing photography at home. In Canada, she lives with her host parents, who also host other exchange students along with Riko. Riko is a creative person, playing in a jazz band and doing drawing in her spare time. She also enjoys photographing things that are new for her or that make her laugh. She says she takes photographs *"because we can keep the memory and we can show it to other people so we can share the feelings, like the emotion, what I feel then."* This is

especially important for her now she is away from home; she is able to share her experiences with her family using her photographs.



Photograph 181 ~ Riko