Lori Moore
Atlantic Provinces Special Education Authority

and

David MacKinnon
Acadia University

Preadolescent Girls and the Presentation of Self: A Dramaturgical Perspective[1]

The purpose of this study was to examine how five preadolescent girls constructed and presented their social identities and the perceived influence of the media in this process. A series of individual and focus group interviews were held with five 9- and 10-year-old girls. Goffman's (1959) interactionist perspective of the theatrical performance provided the framework for the inquiry. The participants in the study offered testimonials that clearly indicate the power and influence of the media in manipulating young girls' perceptions of themselves and others.

Le but de cette étude était d'analyser la façon dont les préadolescentes construisent et présentent leur identité sociale d'une part et leur perception quant à l'influence des médias dans ce processus d'autre part. Cinq filles âgées de 9 ou 10 ans ont participé à une série d'entrevues passées individuellement et en groupes de discussion. L'étude avait comme cadre la perspective interactioniste de Goffman (1959) sur la performance théâtrale. Les témoignages des participantes indiquent clairement la puissance et l'influence manipulatrices des médias dans la perception qu'ont les jeunes filles d'elles-mêmes et des autres.

Introduction

Contextualizing the Drama

A foundational tenet of symbolic interactionism is that an individual's sense of self is forged through social interaction (Blumer, 1969; Charon, 2000; Prus, 1996). In effect, we seek and construct ourselves through social discourse. Such discourse comprises *texts*—oral, written, and body language—that constitute a shared meaning system (Currie, 1999). In this article we explore the self and social texts constructed by a small group of preadolescent girls based on what they see and hear through mass media and the influence this has on each girl's identity and social presentation of self. The analysis is based on a graduate research study that used dramaturgy as a framework for understanding everyday life (Moore, 1999). The purpose of that study was to examine how five preadolescent girls constructed and presented their social identities and the perceived influence of the media in this process. Although the stories of

these five girls represent a narrow lens on the impact of media, they clearly illustrate how social interaction and personal identity are potently influenced by the pervasive and compelling nature of their messages.

Although it seems odd to say, mass media are a relatively recent phenomenon (Martin, 1997). Media and media messages have assumed such a taken-for-granted part of everyday life that it might seem as if this has always been so. At present we are inundated with over 1,500 advertisements each day (Heilman, 1998) that suggest how we should look, what we need to buy, how we should be in relationship, what we should consider important, and so on. As these and other media messages are taken up and acted on by individuals and groups, they can profoundly affect social life. That is, they influence the scripts of everyday interaction.[2] At no other time in history has the Shakespearean notion of the world as a stage been more pronounced, a fact well known to the backbone of mass media: advertising. As Lasch (1979) noted over two decades ago,

> All of us, actors and spectators alike, live surrounded by mirrors. In them, we seek assurance of our capacity to captivate or impress others, anxiously searching out blemishes that might detract from the appearance we intend to project. The advertising industry deliberately encourages this preoccupation with appearances. (p. 92)

We know this; the social texts of advertisements and the mass media are increasingly transparent. Through critical media studies and other forms of cultural analysis, we have a language of critique. Even youth—a favorite target of advertisers—are increasingly capable of sifting media messages to ascertain their not-so-hidden agendas (Durham, 1999). It is, therefore, a testament to the often contradictory and complex nature of human group life that media continue to have a huge impact on how we understand and present ourselves (Blair & Sanford, 1999; Daniluk, 1998; Durham, 1999; Gilbert, 1998; Heilman, 1998; Peiss, 1998, Poulton, 1996). Perhaps we make sense of this by realizing that media do not stand separate from us. We construct, and are constructed by, media. Although the images of women and men presented in media are largely based on stereotypes, we can understand this as being a reflection of the social system that produced them (Martin, 1997).

In a commentary on the marketing of women's bodies, Kilbourne (1989) comments:

> If one accepts these mythical and degrading images [distorted body image ideal, children as sex objects], to some extent one actualizes them. By remaining unaware of the profound seriousness of the ubiquitous influence, the redundant message and the subliminal impact of advertisements, we ignore one of the most powerful "educational" forces in the culture—one that greatly affects our self-image, our ability to relate to one another, and effectively destroys any awareness and action that might help to change that climate. (p. 10)

Hancock (1989) argues that within every woman there is a sense of freedom of self, first articulated between the ages of 8 and 10, that is severed in the process of growing up female. Perhaps this freedom of self is migrating to earlier years, leaving preadolescent girls in the shadow of powerful cultural messages that

contribute to their definitions of femininity and their emerging sense of self (Blair & Sanford, 1999).

Preparing the Audience: Media, Women, and Girls

The mass media are pervasive, living in every region of the globe, their potential influence surrounding us. In a summary of Goffman's *Gender Advertising*, Schaum and Flanagan (1992) explain the complexity of advertising:

> advertisements present more than just a static image or depiction of a product. Rather, they display an entire "scene" made up of the most minute elements— gesture, expression, posture, mood, placement—constituting a vivid script of social arrangements and behaviors. The reason advertising is so magnetic to viewers is that as social beings we are constantly engaged in the project of defining ourselves and our relations to others—a lifelong process of learning, so to speak, who we are. Advertising attracts us, not because we have an intense fascination for toothpaste or floor wax, but because it sends out clear and vivid messages about how to act, feel, and be in any situation. (p. 383)

We interpret media messages in an ongoing way according to the meaning they have for our lives (Blumer, 1969). The interactions between the performers in the media and the audience reflect some of the characteristics of the interactions we have with others and with ourselves (Lauer & Handel, 1983).

The notion of woman as body has been traced back to the 4th century BC when Aristotle espoused the principle that the role of men was to govern, and the role of women was to bear children (Currie & Raoul, 1992). In effect, anatomical differences formed the justification for gender differences (Bourdieu, 2001). This belief is still alive, although it is cleverly masked by language that overtly espouses gender equality. According to Greenspan (1993), "woman in contemporary patriarchal society is fundamentally identified with her body" (p. 164). Many feminist writers concur that women's identity emanates from the physical body, an object to be presented for viewing (Brumberg, 1997; Currie & Raoul, 1992; Spitzack cited in McKinley & Hyde, 1996; Wiseman, Gray, Mosimann, & Ahrens, 1992; Wolf, 1991).

When we consider the struggles of women everywhere, the influence of media messages on the lives of young and impressionable children comes as no surprise. To complicate matters, young people deny or are often unable to acknowledge how they are influenced by the media, although the media influence each of us regardless of age (Bibby & Posterski, 1992).

As Gilbert (1998) notes, the literature pertaining to young children and how they conceptualize their bodies is limited, although the child's world is imbued with dominant images of the body viewed through the media. In his research with 5- and 6-year-old children, Gilbert reported that the children were already reading fashion magazines and that they tended to identify with well-known models and celebrities.

Young girls are bombarded with messages about femininity and beauty. Weight loss is an issue for increasing numbers of elementary schoolchildren (Chernin, 1981; Doyal, 1995; Garner & Kearney-Cooke, 1996; Hesse-Biber, 1996; Kilbourne, 1989; Myers-Wall, 1989). Poulton (1996) reported on a television commercial advertising a weight-loss product in which two girls about 7 or 8 years old commented on how slim one of their mothers was. One girl asked the other if she was jealous of her mother. The response was, "Not as long as she

tells me her secrets" (p. 62). From Playskool to Barbie, young girls learn to view themselves in narrow, unrealistic, and potentially dangerous ways.

That advertising is reaching younger and younger age groups seems beyond question. Gilbert (1998) found that girls as young as 5 are influenced by the fashion industry:

> The images portrayed in the fashion industry undoubtedly influence the very basis of our society, as young girls, in particular, follow the fashion industry and the powerful statements that it makes through the medium of magazines and television programs that vilify the young, slim, and athletic bodies. (pp. 65-66)

Although there is only sparse research on the influence of media on young girls' sense of self/body (Gilbert, 1998), considerable research indicates that adolescents and adult women are profoundly affected. With more money and energy earmarked for younger markets, one could expect to see greater numbers of preadolescent girls increasingly influenced by the same industry that has older girls and women engaged in a cycle of self-condemnation. Unfortunately, young girls often have difficulty separating public performances from inner personalities. They are, in dramaturgical terminology, "sincere performers." Part of this performance involves a process whereby they dissociate from themselves and "become hostage to the ever-changing opinions of others" (Friedman, 1997, p. 33). As demonstrated by the participants in this study, being hostage to media messages has a profound influence on young girls' sense of self and relationships with others.

Methodology and Method

In a 1993 preface to her seminal work on women's development, Gilligan (1982/1993) speaks of the importance of listening to the voices of women (and men) to see how they are speaking of themselves, of their relationships, and of human nature. In voice we hear how identity is constructed, the working definitions of our gendered selves, of masculinity and femininity. Currie (1999) reminds us that "one is not born but becomes a woman" (p. 282). Although identity construction is a lifetime's work, adolescence and preadolescence are times of particular vulnerability and sensitivity, when the presentation of self is of paramount importance and the impact of media messages can be especially powerful (Blair & Sanford, 1999; Currie, 1999; Durham, 1999; Gilbert, 1998; Heilman, 1998). While acknowledging this, it is important not to fall into the trap of seeing youth as fodder for media ingestion in any helpless sense, for this denies personal agency and resistance (Bordo, 1991; Currie, 1999).

Talking with preadolescent girls was part of my (Moore) journey to return to a time when there was far less pressure to conform to a presentation of self so influenced by media messages. As Giroux (1997) points out:

> It is crucial to experience one's relationship to the present from the inside, as part of an ongoing dialogue between oneself, the past, and the emergence of a present that dispenses with obligation to remember. More specifically, it is crucial to remind oneself that any discourse about youth is simultaneously a narrative about the ideologies and social practices that structure adult society. (p. 3)

We cannot completely separate the experiences of young girls from the experiences of adult women, because media messages are aimed at all females.

Messages learned as a young girl, if unchallenged, carry forward into adulthood, influencing relationships with others and one's own sense of identity.

Perusing the Stage

The study was grounded in symbolic interactionism, and specifically in the dramaturgical perspective of Goffman (1959). Goffman uses the drama metaphor to outline how individuals become performers, engaging in certain behaviors that attempt to guide and control the impression others have of them. He identifies six elements that guide the organization of social life, four of which are central to this study: performances, teams, regions, and impression management.

Goffman (1959) contends that when an individual plays a part, she or he implicitly seeks to have others accept and believe the impression she or he fosters. This role-playing can assume real dimensions for an individual such that she or he may come to see the performance as reality. This is the "sincere" performer, one who is "sincerely convinced that the impression of reality which he stages is the real reality" (p. 17). Everyone consciously or unconsciously plays a role, and it is in these roles that we come to know one another and ourselves. But in a desire to offer an idealized presentation, the performer must conceal actions that would otherwise contradict the performance. This strategy of hiding contradictory actions is referred to as "secret consumption" (p. 42). In an example of eating as a form of consumption, an individual who is bulimic will engage in socially acceptable eating patterns in the presence of others, but will binge and purge in private.

According to Goffman (1959), *teams* refers to a group of individuals whose cooperation must be secured if a given definition of the situation is to be maintained. The team is a particular grouping, not in the social structure sense of the word, but rather in relation to an episode of interaction or a series of interactions. The team members adhere to a definition of the situation that is specific to that situation and cooperate to project a certain image.

Goffman also identifies front and back regions. The place where a particular performance is given is the front region, and it is here where the individual emphasizes those aspects of the performance that are favorable to her or his definition of the situation, and suppresses those aspects that might discredit it. The back regions, on the other hand, are the places where rehearsals and preparatory activities occur, where individuals in effect let down their hair. Here they can express feelings and thoughts that would ruin the performance if they occurred in the front region (Lauer & Handel, 1983).

Impression management is a central concept in dramaturgy. It refers to our attempts to control the behavior of others and have them define situations as we intend. To maintain the fidelity of a performance, individuals as well as members of the audience must employ certain defensive measures to "save the show." These include loyalty, discipline, and circumspection. The circumspect performer will carefully select an audience that will not challenge the performance to the point of it being threatened.

Appearance is one of the root tools of impression management. In the establishment of one's identity, and in the desire to indicate to others the appropriate way to define a situation, appearance—of which clothing is one facet—indicates understanding of a shared meaning.

The Writer as Director

Qualitative interviews, both individual and focus group, were selected as methods that illuminate the ways the girls construct their social lives. As a social construction, reality is both individually defined and socially negotiated. Our knowledge of the world rests neither inside nor outside of us, but rather "in the relationship between person and world" (Kvale, 1996, p. 44). It is through language that we move toward an understanding of how others experience the world. How people interact in the world has its foundations in how they make sense of their experience, and "as a method of inquiry interviewing is most consistent with people's ability to make meaning through language" (Seidman, 1991, p. 7).

The five preadolescent girls were selected from an elementary school of approximately 275 students in a rural Nova Scotia community. With the permission of school administrators and teachers, a meeting was held with all the girls in a grade 4 class, and later with all the girls in a grade 5 class. The purpose of these initial meetings was to describe the proposed study to the girls and to determine who was interested in participating. Predictably, some girls demonstrated a keen interest in the topic whereas others seemed indifferent. Of particular interest were those girls who exhibited a level of comfort in sharing and articulating their thoughts. As a result of these meetings, a tentative research group was established that included three 9-year-old girls and two 10-year-old girls. Each of these girls was interviewed individually to determine her interest, and parental consent was obtained. All were informed of the nature of the research and told they could withdraw at any time.

Challenges were expected in working with girls of this age, but the magnitude of the challenge became clear only during the initial meetings. Learning *from* children, as opposed to *studying* them, requires us to reassess what we think we know about children (Thorne, 1993). The challenge was to be in the presence of children and hear their stories as they wanted to tell them. Trying to interview them individually was intensely problematic, for it underscored the power imbalances between researcher and participant, manifest in their desire to give the "right" answer and to respond with the briefest of sentences. Bringing them together as a focus group created an immediate and positive change in the research process. The girls then had one another, and the power imbalance, although still evident, receded into the background.

Each girl was interviewed individually, and we had six meetings as a group. Each was taped, with the exception of the fifth session when the tape-recorder malfunctioned. All tapes were transcribed. The girls were informed that they could review the tapes or transcripts and that we would meet again when a draft of their stories had been constructed.

After each session, tapes were reviewed carefully and issues identified that formed the substance of subsequent interviews. Once the fieldwork was completed, tapes were transcribed and analyzed sentence by sentence. Each sentence was given a code word or words that best described it. Once all data had been coded, interrelated codes were collapsed into broader groupings, which served as the major themes for the study.

The Performers

The group consisted of five white middle-class girls, each selecting a fictitious name of her choosing: Alicia, Gwen, Alison, Faye, and Alex.

Alicia was 9 years old, had straight blond hair, and at the time of the study was in grade 4. She typically dressed in athletic-style clothing and was considered "cool," but not "preppy" by her classmates. She was an able student and presented herself as thoughtful and reflective.

Gwen was 10 years old, in grade 5, and had thick, shoulder-length blond hair. She very much wanted others to see her as a "prep," and dressed with this in mind. This usually consisted of well-matched outfits, such as a blue and white striped T-shirt with Nevada overalls (one bib button undone and hanging), and a blue sweatshirt tied around her waist. She was athletic and participated in intramural sports as well as a community-based basketball program.

Alison was a petite 9-year-old in grade 4. She had long blond hair that was often styled and braided with care. She was considered by her teacher to be a model student—pleasant, hard-working, polite—and was quite thoughtful in her contributions to our discussions. She would be considered a cute, innocent, happy, and contented young girl.

Faye was 10 years old and in grade 5. She was shorter than average for her age and had long dark hair and a dark complexion. She had a body—round, not fat—that will probably never be able to accommodate itself to contemporary standards of beauty as portrayed in the media. A popular girl and a leader in her class, Faye was very interested in clothes and fashion and claimed to spend a lot of time thinking about her appearance.

Alex was 9 years old and in grade 4. She was slender, with straight, shoulder-length light brown hair with bangs. Although she wore glasses, she disliked them, feeling that they put her at a disadvantage in peer relationships. Alex often found herself on the outside of small groups of girls, and although she was not sure why this happened, she suspected it was because of her physical appearance.

The Performances

In this section we offer brief descriptions of the three main themes that were developed in the course of the research: self in relation to others, appearance, and media.

Self in relation to others. Three of the girls spoke about struggles with self-esteem, in each case connecting it with physical appearance. Alex felt that if she had different clothes, more like those that some of the other girls wore, she would feel better about herself:

> Some people they think they're pretty because they have different clothes from everybody, like some girls they try to wear really fancy-like belly button shirts, and in the summertime they always wear short, really short shorts, and like they think they're really cool and pretty like that.

Gwen also felt different from other girls and talked about not feeling as pretty as others, even after buying new clothes:

> Yeah, um, like sometimes I don't think I'm as pretty as the other girls and stuff, and like my mom and I ... we go to Frenchy's to get stuff, and I do like the clothes that other people wear and stuff. Sometimes I just don't think I still look like them, and sometimes I feel I don't.[3]

In one-on-one conversation, Faye spoke of her experiences of low self-esteem when she was younger, relating it to her desire to be thinner and more physically attractive:

> Well, I felt the same way in grade 3 because a lot of people would call me fatso, or something like "really big" or anything they could think of, or a "big wrestler," but, um, and I used to always want to wear the same things, or if I had one wish I'd wish to be thinner or prettier or something like that, and it lowered my self-esteem. I was really ... it was really bad in grade 3.

Faye said things improved significantly by grade 4, and that by grade 5 she had learned to like herself for who she was, and issues of thinness became much less important to her.

Alex, Gwen, and Faye expressed strong desires to change some aspects of how they believed others saw them. Their feelings about themselves came through clearly in their language, and these feelings seemed to have a negative impact on their self-esteem.

Self in relation to others: What men and boys like. In addition to their struggles with self-esteem, the girls raised the issue of females as the objects of males' desires. They expressed beliefs that males want to be with thin, blue-eyed females, and that females feel pressure to respond to these perceived desires. As Alex noted:

> Boys expect you to be like this (gestured flat stomach, skinny) ... some boys think you have to have blond hair, blue eyes, all this perfect stuff. Some boys think you have to have the right clothes, you have to have the right body, you have to like ... like they sort of like a perfect body, perfect clothes, long eyelashes.

Alison espoused a similar view:

> They don't like any fat girls. They like exactly pretty. And it makes some girls feel like ... it makes them feel like they have to dress perfect and they can't dress like they want anymore. And they have to dress a certain way and they tan and put their hair in a certain style and they have to look in the mirror and say "like do you think I look nice?" and stuff.

In a more extreme statement, Gwen said:

> Well, you know that old saying, there was this guy [who] said the only people [who] have the right to live on the earth are people with blond hair and blue eyes. I think that affects a lot of people.

The girls have already been immersed in the messages that perpetuate their enculturation in traditional gender roles, which suggest they need to be beautiful and perfect for their mates. They made these comments after a session in which we perused advertisements in magazines. They are clearly interpreting messages in popular culture that encourage females to succumb to female passivity and the sexualization of appearance.

Appearance: Body size. Both in individual meetings and group gatherings the girls discussed concerns relating to body size. They all revealed feelings of

embarrassment about their bodies when they were with friends, comparing themselves with others and believing they did not quite measure up. When Faye confessed that she lied about her weight during a class ski trip because of her fear of being ridiculed, the other girls joined in with confessions of their own. This worked two ways: either being too fat or too skinny. The following excerpts highlight their concerns about body.

> Well, I think now I'm fine with who I am and stuff like that. I don't think I'm that fat, but I might want to lose a couple of pounds. (Gwen)

> People look at me and they go, "Flabby, flabby." I'm not a great nutritious person but I eat nutritious food and though I do that people go, "Look at you, you're really flabby." But like I eat enough vegetables, what am I supposed to do? I play basketball … and everyone goes, "Your legs are so flabby," but they're really not, it's really muscle. I mean you can't get rid of it. (Alicia)

> Well, I used to be just so skinny and my body would just sort of be nice and skinny and stuff like that and … I'm not that skinny anymore. (Alison)

> I learned [sic: yearned] to be a lot thinner in the waist 'cause there I was just … I was getting over grade 3 where I wasn't really fat anymore, but I guess it was almost like you would be really cool almost if you were thinner. (Faye)

> But there is no certain weight, there is a certain look. If you look … you could be skinny and weigh one thousand pounds but they only care that you look skinny I guess. It's not really your weight. (Faye)

All the girls indicated that they would change their body size given the opportunity. We wonder at that age if any part of the discontent for some girls is more about sharing the dominant cultural message that as a female you are supposed to be dissatisfied with your body.

Appearance: Clothes. The girls all believed that clothes and fashion are important to girls their age and that there is some pressure to have particular kinds of clothing and to look good wearing it. Gwen shared the following:

> You try to dress really WOW, and you try to match things and stuff 'cause like when you were younger you really didn't care what you wore. You'd just throw on that. You'd just say, "Oh, I love this shirt, I love these pants," and just put them together. And it's really weird because before you didn't do that. You didn't go, "Oh no, I don't like that, I need something to match." Like when you were 5, or 6, or 7, or something.

Many of the girls shared similar stories about the influence of peers on clothing choices and how difficult these choices can be. Alicia's comments are representative:

> They [friends] sort of set you up, and maybe someone asks you to wear something, and then another person asks you to wear a totally different thing, and then you don't know what to do so you just wear something of your own and so … and then you sort of get these people upset at you because you didn't wear anything that they wanted you to wear. So people should just sort of give you a break, because it's not very fair.

More than just the style of clothes is significant to these girls. Where the clothes are purchased is an issue as well. Clothing that is considered "accept-

able" can quickly lose its status when it is discovered that it was purchased at a department store or a used clothing outlet. As Alicia noted,

> There's this girl, and she goes to Toronto to get most of her clothes, and like so … and I bought this really cool shirt and it was from Zellers, and she goes, "Where did you get your shirt?" and I go, "Zellers," and she like started to hate it because it came from Zellers.

Both Gwen and Alison spoke to the importance of brand names:

> At Suzie Shier and stuff, I like their stuff. They have all this nice nail polish and stuff and belly tops and stuff like that. Bell bottom pants and those shoes with the heels is what I'm into right now. (Gwen)

> Like we usually go to Mic Mac Mall [in Dartmouth] to buy clothes and stuff … I like clothes from the Gap. And I like some shirts from Suzie Shier. There's a catalogue called Land's End and I like to get clothes from that. (Alison)

There is substantial pressure for girls to have the right clothes and to be up to date on the latest fashions. Alex seemed to have the most conflict about issues of clothing because her parents did not support her desire to have the same clothes as her peers, and she experienced some ridicule because of this. Having "cool" clothing was one of the most important factors in peer groups for these girls, and they were prepared to go to great lengths to be fashionable and to be acknowledged for doing so.

Media and pressure. The girls all expressed a belief that media are a powerful force in their lives. They spoke about the unattainable images of perfection and the impact these images have on young girls. They shared their concerns about how messages about body size, clothes, and beauty encourage them to be critical and less accepting of themselves.

Alicia offers the first glimpse into the confusion that can result from media messages, and Faye and Gwen add their perspectives:

> Well, some of them like … um, maybe they'll say one day you wear … in a magazine or on television maybe they'll say, like, wear purple jeans and a black shirt, and then you go to school and people think you're really weird, and some people blame it on the magazines, some blame it on themselves for listening to that and … (Alicia)

> Well, in magazines they aren't actually real. Well, they are real people but they only take the ones [who] are thin, that'll look good in this outfit and stuff like that. So you obviously know that not everyone would look good in that. (Faye)

> Yeah, like in that kind of stuff [media] they don't take … like I never see more of bigger girls on it, like … and I don't think that's being right, 'cause I don't think it really matters what size you have to be to be on a commercial or something. (Gwen)

Yet the messages had a powerful effect. Faye talked about seeing girls and young women in the media and wanting to become them because they were so happy and had so much control over their lives. She has tried to follow the behavior patterns of some actors she has admired:

> Well, when you see a person who's really thin, and you're here like, "Well, I'm not really all that thin," and so when you try to be that person you might go,

"Well, they don't finish all their supper, they eat half of it and that's probably what makes them thin," and so you try that.

And a few moments later:

> (sings jingle from ad) It makes you want to be them 'cause they run out with these pure faces, and they run out onto a boat and they sail away, and they're all friends, and they're all happy.

The media values of thinness and beauty are clearly evident in the language and behavior of these girls. They have each chosen to accept the messages to varying degrees, but they are all aware of the impact of media messages in their lives.

Media: Television. Television has been a powerful influence for the girls, so much so for some of them that they take on the role of a television character in their everyday lives. Gwen suffered physically from her efforts to imitate one of her favorite singers from a music video. She wanted to look just like the main singer for No Doubt—whose name she used as her fictitious one during this research—so she used nail polish to paint the side of her face, around the eye. When she tried to remove it she used nail polish remover and burned the side of her face. Still, the impact of television in her life remained:

> They (girls in grade 6) watch the show on fashion that got them being ahead of the fashion. So they kind of like … they kind of say, "Well, it's in fashion to wear this and if you don't wear this you're not in fashion." And they want to be in fashion, so they don't like you if you're not.

The extent to which television characters created structures for their own (the girls') lives was apparent in their language. The following quotations are excerpted from our discussion of the television show *Clueless*:

> It can make you feel really frustrated because you try to have a computer that can draw all your stuff [*Clueless* girls have a computer that organizes and plans their wardrobes] and you work and work and you get in trouble because you don't really care about anything else anymore. (Faye)

> Sometimes it makes you feel really, like, makes you feel kind of bad about yourself because you don't have all that cool stuff that they do. Some people think that then they're not cool. (Alex)

> It's not the clothes thing. It's like I hate myself. Like I don't have … there's nothing good about me, so I've probably been through 16 million shows, not just *Clueless*. (Faye)

The girls agreed that if there were no television the pressures to conform to the stereotypical beauty would be less. Gwen and Faye said that they sometimes feel they no longer want to be who they are, they begin to hate their own lives, and will do everything within their power to be more like their media idols. Although Alison reminded everyone that individuals in the entertainment industry are people just like themselves, Gwen, Faye, and Alex were convinced that the lives of the stars must be wonderful. Faye was so convinced by television stars that she claimed she could not go back to her own life, so she "switched" and did everything like the media personalities she admired.

The girls have already begun to recognize the mixed messages projected in the media. These contradictions were reflected in their dialogue. On the one

hand they argued vehemently against the manipulative tactics of the media, whereas on the other hand they had previously talked about the ideas for makeup, hair and nail care, and fashion they learned through various media.

As the Curtain Closes

Performances

Goffman (1959) identified the personal front as the mask one wears to carry out performances. The mask encompasses all aspects of appearance, including physical size, posture, speech, and expressions. During our meetings the girls all wore masks reflected in the mass media. Their clothes were the latest styles portrayed by teen fashion magazines, their mannerisms and expressions similar to those of female teen celebrities.

Faye spoke about how far she would go to be like celebrities who were thin and beautiful. She looked to the media to create a definition of self that she would feel comfortable presenting to those in her world. As Douglas (1994/1995) noted, the media contribute to the alienation of girls and women from themselves. For the most part, Faye also seemed convinced by her own performances, that is, she was a "sincere performer" (Goffman, 1959). When challenged to review her performance Faye became aware that I (Moore) was not taken in by it, and discrepancies between appearance and reality were not well concealed. With great frustration and sadness Faye admitted to being "a fake," unhappy with who she was and desperate to become one of her media idols.

Gwen was also strongly influenced by television and magazines. Her presentation of self included an identity constructed from materials and ideas supplied by the media. Like the other girls, she spent a lot of time preoccupied with her appearance and how she could present herself so as to impress others and win attention. Gwen's desire to identify with famous girls is intentionally encouraged by the mass media (Lasch, 1979). Giroux (1997) noted that the bodies of young people are objectified by the media, treated as commodities. The girls were able to identify this objectification and sexualization of females' bodies in magazines, yet they remained caught up in the drama, looking to media celebrities to help them construct their own presentations.

Teams: Self in Relation to Others

The girls in this study together constituted a team, defined around the task of participating in our group meetings. While outside they socialized with others; within the boundaries of the group they cooperated to project a certain image. As the director, I (Moore) was also a team member, although my position was one of being on the fringe, between audience and performer.

In my role as the audience, I was responsible for upholding the integrity of the performance. There were occasions when I wished to challenge the front region performances after getting glimpses into the back region, but drawing attention to discrepancies might have jeopardized the performances.

Teams are defined around interactions with an agreed-on definition of the social situation (Goffman, 1959). These girls spoke about the qualities required for membership in a desired team of peers. As Ayers (1994) and Hesse-Biber (1996) both reported, girls believe they must look a certain way to have friends, and they feel hopeless and imperfect when they cannot measure up to the

team's expectations. Faye shared with the group a story of a classmate who was ostracized because of the way she walked. She did not have the physical qualities to fit the team's guidelines until Faye had the opportunity to go to the girl's home and discovered that she had a closet full of fashionable clothes. From that point on her status with the team was established.

The girls shared their feelings about what boys wanted. Their conclusions were the same as those reported by Kilbourne (1989), that "the boys expect girls to be perfect and beautiful ... and skinny" (p. 8). Alex felt pressure to be pretty, to have blond hair and blue eyes. Like the other girls, she believed that team membership in the "cool" group was dependent on being pretty and wearing the right clothing. As Orbach (1978/1988) noted, girls have to consider what will be pleasing to others in their presentation of self.

Impression Management: Appearance

In attempting to manage the impressions others form of us, fashion is considered to be one of the most significant tools to identify status and establish identity (Bourdieu, 2001; Brownmiller, 1984). The stories shared by the girls mirrored the importance of clothing in impression management. Alex and Alicia both referred to situations where either they or their friends were rejected because of the clothes they had purchased. Not only do clothes have to look fashionable, they must also be purchased from a store that specializes in female fashion. As Ayers (1994) points out, clothing can symbolize status in a group or can be the source of rejection.

That young girls worry about their weight is a well-documented phenomenon (Gilbert, 1998; Kilbourne, 1989; Poulton, 1996). Friedman (1997) found that girls want the body of Barbie and find their own bodies to be unacceptable. Four of the girls in this study believed they were too fat or heavy, one thought she was too skinny, and all of them, given the opportunity, would change their appearance. In the drama of social interactions these girls felt they would be more popular and more content with themselves if they could change certain aspects of their physical appearance. At the ages of 9 and 10 they had already determined that impression management was important in their lives and sought to do all they could to control the impressions others formed of them.

Regions: Conformity and Conflict

A region is "any place that is bounded to some degree by barriers to perception" (Goffman, 1959, p. 106). The performances enacted by the girls took place in an empty classroom. This was the front region, and they worked hard to maintain the performance here lest I (Moore) see the back region. However, I was able to glimpse the back region of Faye's and Alicia's performances because others gave them away.

Faye's mother (an acquaintance of Moore), in her disclosure of Faye's behavior at home, provided a backstage peek that told a different story from the one she tried to construct in the individual and group meetings. Eventually, Faye admitted to being a fake, pretending to be happy, but all the while feeling pressure to conform to media standards. This backstage glimpse was short-lived. She quickly returned to her performance in future sessions, pretending we had never seen her backstage region.

Alicia's backstage region was inadvertently exposed by Alex in one of our individual sessions when she spoke of looking at magazines that belonged to Alicia. According to Alex, Alicia was one of the trendsetters in their grade because she had direct access to teen magazines. Alicia, apparently conscious of my role as audience and wishing to conform to what she believed I was seeking from her, discreetly avoided any mention of these magazines. She presented as the most intellectual in the group, able to articulate her frustration with the influence wielded by the media, and was the most cautious about getting too personal about the contradictions in her own presentations.

Alicia is not alone in her conflict. "Our collective history of interacting with and being shaped by the mass media has engendered in many women a kind of cultural identity crisis" (Douglas, 1994/1995, p. 8). The media encourage this dilemma between front region and back region performances. We conceal some aspects of ourselves, compartmentalizing them to the back region, and wear the masks validated by the media to carry out front region performances.

If everyone who has experienced feelings of inferiority through mass media messages speaks in unison, voices strong in opposition, we can offer young girls alternative expectations. Unfortunately, girls interpret media messages based not only on the messages themselves, but also on their observations that most females respond to the media in similar ways. They watch their mothers stand in front of the mirror, obsessed with a round tummy or flabby thighs. They observe their female teachers standing all day in uncomfortable but fashionable shoes. They see women in their neighborhood stand at the cash register, some purchasing the latest issue of *Vogue* or *Glamour*, others looking at *People* magazine's best and worst dressed celebrities.

Reflections

An issue of *Consumer Reports* (September, 1998) indicated that not only are marketers sending more powerful messages to young people about desirable products, but that they are also directing advertising of adult products like vehicles, vacations, and telephone services directly to children complete with arguments kids can use to influence their parents' buying behavior. In the 1990s spending by children aged 4-12 tripled. Advertisers are relentless in their pursuit of an expanding market base, and young children are a current target.

The girls in this study are already losing that sense of youthful freedom. They have begun traveling on the road of self-condemnation because they do not mirror what they see in the media. It would be easy to be fearful, almost hopeless, in the face of the magnitude of the situation. Instead, we are hopeful. Our hopefulness rests in the increasing number of critical texts that speak to the social construction of identity (Berman, 1997; Currie, 1999; Durham, 1999; Giroux, 1997; Martin, 1997; Volman & ten Dam, 1998). Returning to the interactionist premise that opens this article, we believe that the sort of social discourse that emanates from works such as these will increasingly engage youth in a critical examination of cultural reproduction and identity construction. The school presents as an obvious site for such work. The challenge is to conceptualize schools as political arenas and to reconstruct education as a process that is based both on the immediacy of children's lives and on the broader social, political, and economic context of which they are part; in short,

to undertake what Portelli and Vibert (2001) refer to as a "curriculum of life" (p. 63).

Notes

1. This article is a modified version of a paper presented at the Qualitative Analysis Conference at the University of New Brunswick in Fredericton, May, 1999. The metaphor of life as drama, which serves as the methodological framework, is also used to structure the article.
2. Although we use the term *scripts* to emphasize the use of drama as a metaphor for everyday life, it is important not to consider these scripts as deterministic in nature, but to see them instead as shaped and reshaped by individuals through interaction.
3. In this quotation Gwen refers to Frenchy's, which is a local used-clothing store that purchases clothes in bulk and sells them at substantially reduced prices.

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