Consuming fashion and producing meaning through online paperdolls
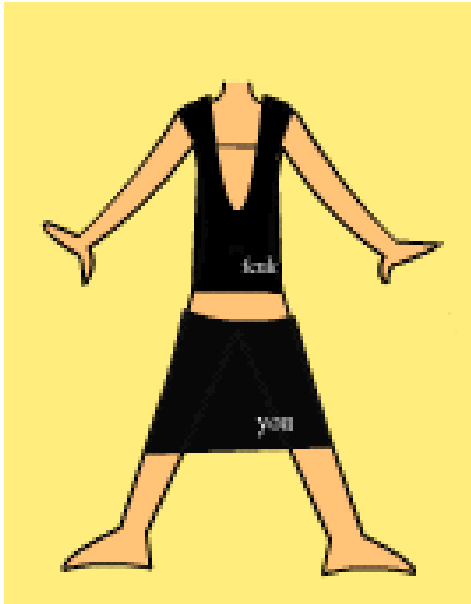
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Figure 1: Dani's paperdoll outfit

The design in figure one shows a fairly shapeless (and headless) cartoon-like model, displaying a top with a plunging neckline and a matching low-riding skirt; the top is marked with the 'fcuk' label, and 'you' appears as a label on the skirt. The message, 'fcuk you', replicates slogans available on T-shirts from the popular clothing company, French Connection UK. The design was produced by Dani, a twelve year old girl, in the context of a study on online fashion and identity. This 'fcuk you' outfit epitomises positions of the girls' in the study – the clothing design is original, stylish and technically quite advanced, expressing skill, creativity and originality; the outfit is sleek, black, and sexy expressing the fantasy play with future versions of the self; and the message (fuck you) is teen-speak, expressing confidence, independence, disregard for authority and belonging to the group of teens who speak that language. In line with this interpretation, Rocamora's (2004) study of teen girls wearing 'cheeky logo T-shirts' describes girls as

using the shirts for social statements, not as victims of an industry which sexualises girls and women, as some argue. One could also interpret Dani's use of the label FCUK as a marker of the 'tribe' she wishes to belong to (Sahlins, 1976). Here Dani's outfit also fulfils an aspirational function (Cook, 2004), orienting her toward future objects and practices, which Russell and Tyler (2005) describe as 'position[ing] young girls in terms of a precocious sexuality, and in this respect, as both the subjects and objects of consumption' (229).

As this brief introduction demonstrates, girls and young women occupy a complicated space – they often are in positions whereby they are gaining independence within their family in social and financial matters, giving them more choice in what they wear, who they see and what leisure activities they pursue. Teenage girls are at a point in their lives when defining and performing their subject positions becomes complicated by choice as they become subject to discourses not only around children, but also around women. Girls are seen to be victims of media and fashion industries which position them as too sexualised too early, yet also agents of 'girl power' – confident, opinionated and celebrating their entrance to womanhood. The aim of the study upon which this chapter is based was to engage girls in discussions about some of these competing discourses.

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

hair, eyes, and skin colour (see Figure 2). The study on which this chapter is based focuses on 26 girls age 12 – 13 as they both consume and produce dollmaker websites.

Figure 2: Dollmaker designs

Through visual data and interviews, the girls in the study position themselves in complicated ways – as innocent children, as scornful teenagers, as confident individuals and as knowledgeable and savvy young women – and they seamlessly shift from one position to another as they appropriate and respond to surrounding discourses. I will argue in this chapter that debates about girls either as subjects of negative effects of media images or as active agents who are employing media and fashion as cultural resources are both problematic, overlooking things girls are doing and leaving issues unresolved. I will show how girls can be conscious and critical of the ways they are being positioned, yet also take pleasure in the structures creating those positions, raising many questions for researchers and educators.

Background – children, media and the female body

Looking first at discursive practices which define children, one of the frequent popular arguments is that children are growing older quicker. This is based on the premise that media have caused the 'disappearance of childhood', as Postman argued in his book of that title in 1983 (see also Elkind, 1981 and Winn, 1984). According to these authors, there has been a blurring or even erasure of the boundary between childhood and

adulthood due partly to children's exposure to adult topics and partly to the lack of relaxed free-play time (i.e. children are on adult type schedules). Within this 'moral panic' stance, people argue that in contrast to previous generations of children, today children are rushed into adult roles before they are ready either psychologically or physically. Yet as Buckingham concludes, these writers 'explicitly draw on one of the most seductive post-Romantic *fantasies* of childhood: the notion of a pre-industrial Golden Age, an idyllic Garden of Eden in which children could play freely, untainted by corruption' (2000: 35, original emphasis).

This innocent child discourse impacts on discussions about young teen clothing and media consumption. However, the discursive field is further complicated by concerns about the sexualisation of girls. Whilst girls in the innocent child discourse are asexual (Gittins, 1998), there is also fear that girls are at risk of sexual abuse. Using psychoanalysis, Walkerdine (1997) explains that underlying the spoken fears of sexual abuse there is an unconscious fear of adults' own sexual desires for young girls. In this theory, adults are both drawn to the images of the attractive and seductive girl, and at the same time trying to cover them up. Walkerdine writes, 'This is not about a few perverts, but about the complex construction of the highly contradictory gaze at little girls, on which places them as at once threatening and sustaining rationality, little virgins that might be whores, to be protected yet to be constantly alluring' (1997:171). Girls, therefore, are subject to these contradictory discourses which position them as both sexual and asexual, threatening and innocent.

Young teen girls are not only subject to discourses around children, as adolescents they are also positioned by discourses around women. Chernin (1994) analyses what she terms 'the tyranny of slenderness' which is created by men's desire for slender, non-threatening women. Focusing on women with eating disorders, Chernin describes the oppression of these women who feel they need to be small, quiet and submissive in order to gain men's approval. Similarly, Wolf (1991) analyses what she terms the 'beauty myth' which pervades women's media saturated lives. According to Wolf, women are bombarded by unrealistic images of beauty through various media forms such as advertisements, movies

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

These and other studies which connect body dissatisfaction with images in the media fall broadly under the media effects tradition (see also, Myers and Biocca, 1992; Harrison and Cantor, 1997; Hofschire and Greenberg, 2002). Coming from mainstream sociology and behaviourist psychology, effects researchers take as their starting point the idea that media cause particular behaviours in their audience (see Barker and Petley, 1997, for an overview and critique of the 'media effects' debate). This research implicitly defines children as passive and uncritical readers of media texts and makes the assumption that the text is 'all powerful'. In contrast, 'active audience' research is based on the theory that the meaning of texts is constructed by the viewer, resulting in varying interpretations of any given text. Audiences in this role are able to resist dominant ideologies, reject meanings or messages from texts, enjoy a text without being affected by some implicit negative ideology, and use texts for their own purposes. However, as Buckingham (1993) argues, this approach simplifies readings of media by describing viewers as wholly autonomous, able to reflect and act upon their own needs and desires.

In feminist media studies, adopting a poststructuralist view has created a move to recognise the different, often contradictory, ways of engaging with media texts. Studies on women and soap operas, for example, describe two modes of engagement: one is a critical mode in which the viewers are detached and express comments about the constructed nature of the shows; and the other is more involved and personal, identifying themselves and their lives in particular characters and narratives (Hobson, 1990; Seiter et

al 1989; Katz and Liebes, 1990). However, as Van Zoonen describes, these studies which indicate how housewives relate to soap operas take the category 'woman' for granted and therefore fail to recognise 'they way gender and the reception of popular culture are related', that is, the studies 'reconstruct dominant gender discourse rather than analyse its dynamics' (1994: 123). Van Zoonen calls for a more complex theoretical stance than the simplistic models employed by effects and active audience research. Similarly, McRobbie (1991) criticises content analyses of teen magazines and calls for accounts from readers and magazine publishers in order to gain a better understanding of girls' interactions with these media texts.

I will be utilising a feminist-poststructuralist stance in order to analyse the complexity of interactions between girls and media texts. In this view girls and women are neither dupes to all powerful media, nor are they able to actively resist the hegemonic discourses present in popular media. Although there are dominant discourses which 'invite' a particular reading of a text, there are also alternative readings produced within the discursive field of the viewer. However, the number of different readings is not endless - the discursive field offers a limited menu of options available to viewers. At the same time as viewers are choosing their positions or actively reading media texts, they are also being positioned by the surrounding discourses.

The aim of this chapter is to analyse ways girls interact with discourses around media, fashion and body image; however, I want to avoid the rather vague conclusion that the situation for young teen girls is more complex than effects or active audience models imply. I will show how arguing against these polarised positions, saying girls are not passive but neither are they entirely free agents, particularly arguing against a *causal effects* model, is not allowing us to see some of the important issues for research and discussion. I will first show how girls argue that 'the beauty myth' although it might exist, does not effect them in any simplistic cause-effect model – specifically they say that there are a range of factors connected with how they feel about themselves and how they dress. Then I will analyse the girls' statements more closely to see what we might miss by simply presenting their arguments as proof that the 'cause-effect' model does not

work. In doing so, I will outline questions and challenges for educators, researchers, and in some cases, policy makers.

The study

In order to engage with girls in discussion about their online fashion activities and the surrounding discursive practices, I organised workshops in which girls designed their own webpages. The workshops were conducted at a specialist ICT (Information and Communications Technology) centre connected to a school in inner-city London. The group of girls recruited for the workshop were representative the population of the school which is ethnically diverse (about 75 per cent of the pupils on roll are from minority ethnic groups, the largest being African Caribbean followed by Bangladeshi) coming from backgrounds which reflect mixed but, overall, considerable levels of social and financial hardship. The school arranged for girls to be taken off their regular time table to take part in the two workshops which ran over five days. We did a series of activities which alternated between planning and drawing with pencils and paper and then working on computers, using the software programme Flash for designing. The girls worked in groups to produce a page of figures, clothing and accessories for a drop and drag website (http://www.sens.eu.com/cc/cyberdolls_v2.html). All the girls' names used in this chapter are pseudonyms.

Using participant media production is becoming increasingly popular within media and cultural studies methodologies (e.g. deBlock, 2004; Bloustein, 1998; Goldman-Segal, 1998). In the case of this study, I was using media production as a way of gaining access to girls' understanding of their own media consumption practices. I was hoping that through production, the girls would make explicit some of their implicit knowledge and ideas about media and fashion. In the workshops, the girls focused specifically on designing drop and drag fashion pages, similar to the websites they use. Through their designs the girls had to make decisions about the styles of clothing, the shapes of the bodies, the range of clothing on offer, and the specific cuts of clothing (necklines and skirt hemlines, for example). To help read the visuals I conducted semi-structured interviews to discuss design processes, fashion choices and awareness of adult anxieties

toward fashion and various dress-up activities. This chapter will focus primarily on data collected from the interviews.

Using a form of data-led discourse analysis, I examined the transcripts of the interviews and colour coded themes which emerged. The three themes which I will cover in this chapter are 'modality', 'good parenting' and 'personal attributes'. These themes relate broadly to the theoretical stance I am taking – the themes highlight the different ways girls' position themselves in opposition to powerful media structures; yet at the same time the girls' conversations are full of contradiction, and there are many instances which indicate that media structures are powerful elements in these girls' lives. In the first theme, the girls discuss different texts as being more or less 'realistic', highlighting the idea that modality (truth claims made by texts) and intentionality are important factors in the discussion of media effects. In the second theme we see the girls taking the moral high ground as they discuss good parenting, reflecting on the social context of media and fashion consumption. Finally, the girls draw on various discourses to discuss the role of personal attributes in reading media. By using discourse analysis to investigate the processes which the girls go through as they discuss and interact with fashion, we can see complexities, as they are both positioned by and through the discursive practices surrounding them.

Modality

During the workshops, the girls did an activity in which they designed and made a sales pitch for a fashion website. The girls discussed audiences for their site, and body shape emerged as part of those discussions. Most of the groups were careful to include clothes 'for bigger people' as well as for 'slim people'. In an attempt to engage girls in a discussion about some of the discourses concerning media and body image, I asked directly if they feel that playing with fashion webpages or fashion dolls or reading teen magazines affects how they feel about themselves. The girls had a variety of responses to this question, all centring on factors which affect the way media are read.

Girls argued that they don't compare themselves to images on dollmaker sites ('but they're cartoons' explained Dalia) or to plastic dolls such as Barbie which are clearly not real. The girls were suggesting that modality, that is, the truth claims made by a text, affect how a text is read. As Dalia described, 'like if you look at Bratz they've got a really small body and like some big heads on it'. The girls seemed perplexed that adults would consider play with disproportionate plastic breasts as affecting them: one girl exclaimed, 'my boobs are normal!' The girls' reflection on dolls' modality supports Driscoll's ideas about 'multiplicity of Barbie': '[Barbie] is woman/not-woman and human/not-human, a game that can seem to denaturalize gender despite the anxieties of interested parties' (Driscoll, 2002:97). The girls did not think adults would consider play with fashion dolls or dollmaker websites as risky and instead would see it as they do 'it's only a game', though one group considered the possibility of becoming overly concerned with clothes, putting a financial strain on their family.

With dollmaker and doll play, the girls indicate that the weak modality of the articles they are playing with impacts on their effects. On the other hand, one group of girls indicated that body dissatisfaction might occur when looking at teen magazines:

> VALERIE: it's mostly when you start seeing idols or celebrities in particular that you want to turn yourself like that
>
> GRACE: ya you wanna be like them
>
> …
>
> VALERIE: unless they see an actual body they won't try and make themselves like them

Resources with strong modality, therefore, are seen to have greater effect than those with weak modality. The girls are arguing that a simple cause-effect model is inadequate, and that effects are more complex and determined partly by modality.

Looking past the effects argument, if the girls are saying that dolls and dollmaker images are not real and therefore do not effect them, then what are girls doing with them? The girls' interactions with dollmaker can be described as play: they construct outfits

together, they show each other their finished outfits, they try on outrageous outfits and 'have a laugh'. Dalia describes the pleasure in this play: 'Like, you can make them weird or make them really nice like they're going to a party'. This play is partly about fantasising about their future bodies. Numeyra said, 'I just like the hairstyles, and I just go, "Oh, I wish I had long hair," or something'. When I asked the girls if dressing up on dollmaker would make you then go and want to wear that sort of outfit, Jade said, 'No, you would just think oh what would I look like if I wore that'. These fantasy texts are similar to the girl pin-ups in teenage girl magazines. McRobbie argues that fantasy materials offer spaces for girls to move away from their position as children and towards the exciting and new position of adolescents (1991:184). Similarly, Walkerdine (1997) looks at girls' fantasies as spaces in which girls play with and insert themselves into various discursive practices, and therefore fantasies 'become discursive and material in the social world' (p.188). Finally, relating to digital images, (Davies, 2004) and Thomas (2004) describe how girls experiment with avatars, fantasising and performing different femininities. Thomas concludes 'they "play" with the image and the text they use to present themselves in very particular ways to explore their fantasies of desire' (376).

Questions from this aspect of the data concern the role of fantasy in children and teen's lives. If we are arguing that children and teens need spaces to rehearse and revel in different positions, such as a gorgeous curvaceous or muscle-bound teenager, then we need to know more about what is happening in those spaces. Does fantasy satisfy a curiosity, enable exploration of alternative positions, increase or decrease desire for particular positions? What is happening to identity: are we able to try on and then cast off different positions, and what is left behind when we do that? If we argue that we would rather have teens safely exploring fantasies by reading teen magazines or dressing up online dolls rather than dressing up themselves and going out into the real world, then parents, educators and policy makers need to consider how to allow space for those fantasies. However, this is not to say that we shouldn't be critical of the discourses embedded within those media. The challenge is how to allow teens to indulge in the fantasy but also encourage a critical awareness of, for example, oppressive discourses around female beauty. Again there are questions about how to engage in critical

discussion with teens, but also more broadly about the ability to switch between seemingly conflicting positions. The next section will demonstrate the ease with which girls shift between various positions, starting with the position of a future parent.

Good parenting

According to the interviews, the role of parents is a key factor in how girls read 'the beauty myth'. Several of the girls adopted a moral high ground stance and criticised parents who do not care how their children dressed, or specifically how they dressed their younger daughters:

> JADE: there's some little girl who goes to some primary school I always see her and her mum's always putting her in these big high boots and short skirts and I'm like the girl's no more than six
>
> MACKENZIE: you can't make them be your twin because if they think they're dressing for you

The girls not only take the moral high ground, in this excerpt the girls are speaking from the role of a future parent. Restricting what your child wears is one of the roles of a good parent, in these girls' opinions. On the one hand we can see this type of argument as an indication that the girls see effects as mediated by a number of factors, so again the effects model is inadequate. On the other hand, it is also interesting to look at the discourses the girls are drawing on. Here discourses concerning childhood are being referred to, but more specifically, the girls are using discourses which regulate of childhood. In his analysis concerning the 'disappearance of childhood', Buckingham describes how adult definitions of childhood can not only repress and serve to control children but also produce particular behaviours. Buckingham writes, '[Adults] have defined the kinds of behaviour which are appropriate or suitable for children at different ages' (2000:12). A girl of 'no more than six' is defined above as inappropriately dressed using this regulatory discourse.

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

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

Again, the girls are indicating that effects of 'the tyranny of slenderness' are determined by a range of factors, and the way parents talk to children is a key factor. However, it is striking that these girls are using discourse which Walkerdine and Lucy (1989) assert serves to regulate mothers – providing ready-made guilt trips for the mother who fails to raise a confident daughter. Walkerdine and Lucey describe how, particularly through talk, mothers are assigned a pedagogical role which psychologists and more recently, the general public, insist is crucial to their child's development. The girls in my study have used this discourse to assert that parents hold the key to their child's confidence; and in turn confidence is a key to emotional stability.

Walkerdine and Lucey relate this particular regulatory discourse to social class, arguing that it is middle-class mothers' talk which is seen to be essential to child development. There are questions, therefore, about how the girls, many of whom might not be considered middle-class, are using this discourse as well as a particular educational discourse around self-esteem, as I will be describing in the next section. What is this middle-class discourse allowing or not allowing the girls to say? Furthermore, similar to when the girls are discussing body dissatisfaction and media images, we need to ask how much they are simply repeating particular discourses and how much they are actually engaging with them on a deeper level. Finally, although the girls take a moral high ground position here, they also told me that they sometimes wear clothes to show off their figures. There are questions, therefore, about how girls are negotiating these conflicting positions.

Personal attributes

As indicated in Mackenzie's description of correct parental talk, personal attributes are keys to resisting 'the beauty myth'. These attributes include self-esteem, confidence, and individuality, as these girls describe:

> GIOVANNA: Well, for me, to me I look at it…if you have good self-esteem then you shouldn't be worried. But then if you=
> ASHLEY: =If you don't, if you're not really happy with yourself, then you'll be one of those people who will force themselves to lose weight.
> GIOVANNA: But then again, um, that thing brings the person out of you. Because what you wear tells a lot about you, that you feel comfortable about yourself or if you, um, just want to fit in in a group, or…yeah.

The girls are not only connecting self-esteem with parenting, they are also connecting confidence with eating disorders and dress, and individuality with the ability to resist peer pressures. Clearly, girls' dress and body image is determined by many more factors than media. Looking closer at this excerpt, the girls are drawing in educational discourse around bullying and drugs. Educational discourse frames bullying as connected to confidence – for example, pupils are told that bullies pick on people's insecurities; and acting confident will dissuade bullies. Being confident and comfortable with oneself is also a message in drug education – pupils are told they need to be confident to follow what they think is right, to be themselves and thereby to resist peer pressure to consume alcohol, tobacco or other drugs.

Comfort, mentioned by many of the girls, seems to refer not only to a physical state but also an emotional feeling, as Giovanna indicates: 'Because if you just copy someone else and don't feel comfortable, you're not really yourself'. Again the girls are emphasising the importance of feeling confident. This is echoed is a study on women's clothing choices, in which confidence is connected not only with choice of clothes but also with multi-faceted feelings of comfort (Gillen, 2003). The girls wouldn't feel comfortable in

thongs and short skirts, due in part to the discursive practices which position them as needing to express individuality and innocence.

An interesting element in the above excerpts is the contradiction between expressing individuality and maintaining belonging in a group. According to Giovanna, if you feel confident, then you are able to resist 'just want[ing] to fit in in a group'. The girls have highlighted another problem with the beauty myth – the notion that all girls are attempting to conform to one look. All the groups of girls said that developing an individual style was important, and they also saw it as a benefit of creating fashion designs and playing on dollmaker websites. Part of the fun of playing with dollmaker is 'to create your own image' and 'to express what kind of clothes you like'. The girls are drawing on a particular discourse in which development of personal style is encouraged, for example, teen magazines suggesting personalising wardrobes by searching in second-hand clothing shops (McRobbie, 1991). Although these girls use individuality as an argument to display their independence (from parents, crowds or manipulative media), when I asked them where they would buy clothes if I gave them £100, every girl listed the same sports shop. The girls seem comfortable with these apparent contradictions - on the one hand having an individual style, and on the other hand wearing very similar clothes from the same store. They argued that individual style can be expressed through sports clothes, for example; and different trainers (sport shoes) in particular are indicative of the 'tribe' to which one belongs (Sahlins, 1976). This is reminiscent of analyses of youth subcultures which show how material objects are used by young people as markers of identity, defining their specific social groups, and distinguishing class, race and gender as well as age (Hebdige, 1979; Lury, 1996). And, as Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1995) describe, there is a tension around authenticity, between expression of individuality and expression of belonging to a particular subculture.

Conclusion

Using discourses around individuality, self-confidence and proper parenting, the girls argue that they make conscious decisions about what to wear. On the other hand, we know that girls are bullied for not wearing the 'right' clothes, and although the girls in the

interviews stressed the importance of individual clothing style, their choices of clothes were all very similar. I am not arguing that girls are immune to powerful ideologies inscribed in the production of media aimed at girls, such as the constant bombardment of images of skinny or curvaceous women. But it is important to see teen girls as having 'multiple subjectivities' (Davies, 1989), instead of fixed and unified identities implied in arguments about 'the tyranny of slenderness'.

However, this begs the question, where does this leave girls? (Griffin, 2004) describes how girls are positioned in ambiguous and contradictory ways which work 'to render the girl herself as an impossible subject' (42). Therefore, we need to consider how we can go beyond the passive/active debate and beyond a debate that ends up by saying, 'it's both things and it's complex'. Feminists are asking questions about the 'undoing of feminism' by a new generation of young women who, having grown up in a postfeminist society, no longer see a need for feminism (Griffin, 2004; McRobbie, 2004). In what seems a surprising turn-around from her influential work on teen girls as magazine readers, (McRobbie, 2005) has come out against notions of 'girl power', blaming these discourses on the absence of young activists today: 'So enthralled are young women by the seductive power of the media that critical faculties have been blunted. Female students, the very group who should be challenging these assumptions, are silent'.

The data described in this chapter shows that girls, as in McRobbie's earlier suggestions (1991), are familiar with 'a range of narrative codes against which stories and fictions can be measured for their success or failure' (143). The girls are rejecting particular narrative codes (around media effects, for example) and also buying into others. The challenge for researchers, therefore, is to examine how codes are being rejected, which codes are being accepted, and the questions these processes raise for any number of concerned parties including educators, parents, policy makers and media industries. If students are already critical of media representations of women, but also taking pleasure in them; as educators we need to find a way of engaging students in critical analyses that accept these positions and also move students on to look, for example, at ways ideologies are inscribed in the discourses students are using. If young people are able to take different positions which

argue against the effects of media, this raises questions for parents and policy makers when considering media access and regulation. Finally, media industries are having to consider a different market for their texts. One might argue that media industries are already well-aware that codes are being read in ways which are different to previous generations' readings. However, industries also need to consider what new readings might entail, and what responsibilities they have in producing new readings.

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