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**A CASE STUDY OF BODY IMAGE AND ASPIRATIONAL IDENTITY IN GIRLHOOD**

A Thesis in

Art Education

by

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**ABSTRACT**

This study explores the nature of a western, contemporary, pre-teen girl's identity work through body image. My analysis first introduces the nature of aspiration within tween culture. I then argue that several factors unique to tween-hood provoked the study's participant to increasingly define femininity through bodily manipulation. This transition is accompanied by a gradually decreasing focus on the discourse of girl-childhood to identify herself and negotiate what constitutes an acceptable tween "girl." Lastly, I demonstrate how these factors culminate in the participant's pursuit of the aspirational "discourse of pretty."

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**Chapter I.**

**Introduction**

### **Purpose of Study**

This exploration of a tween girl's identity formation through body image is important because girls' perspectives on the subject continue to receive little academic attention. Although discussions of tweens and body image bubble through the popular media, they originate predominantly in adult observations that decry a growing prevalence of “sexualized” and “exploitive” clothing (Cook & Kaiser, 2004). Vollrath (2006) observes that “There has been relatively little research on what collections and possessions mean to children so that there is a limited appreciation on the part of psychologists with regard to the mental processes associated with shopping, toys, television, stories, music, clothing or the economy in regard to their development” (p. 68). This combination of increased attention to tweens' perceptions of body images in popular culture and the absence of prior academic attention to this phenomenon makes my study timely.

My interest in this subject began as I was researching girls' expressions of body image in artwork. Vollrath's (2006) analyses of her female students' drawings indicate that while the meaning(s) of the clothing styles in her third-graders' portraits varied widely, body image was (generally) a very significant part of how they negotiated the content of their work. Vollrath further observed that her fifth-graders “were very concerned about how they looked in their pictures...Without hesitation, several replied, ‘I changed myself because I didn't like how I looked’ and I can't really look at myself as I really am or ‘I want to look more like this’ (2006, p. 65). Vollrath's work with girls' artistic expression demonstrates that a complex relationship between their identities and body image is real and made visible in their visual representations of self. The created self-images and the girls' descriptions of them are rich sites for exploring the

perception of body image, self and life experiences. Vollrath's female students' drawings "reveal and conceal girls' desires to see themselves not how they are but how they wish they might be or think they should be--a complicated matter operating on multiple levels of pleasure, desire and sociality" (2006, p. 68). Following Vollrath, I used interviews in my study to elicit verbal stories related to artwork; unlike Vollrath, my study is based on in-depth work with one participant. The study is therefore a worldview of tween body image as seen through the eyes of a single informant.

Although Vollrath's work on body image seems to support the adult concern for tween's stereotypical thinking on the subject, these stereotypes also necessarily obscure the imaginative and expressive possibilities latent within girl-children's discussions of their drawings. My study's data support Vollrath's (2006) reactions to these self-depictions, when she "found it difficult to accept that it was culturally inevitable for girls to only represent themselves in whole, idealized, iconic, and predetermined ways" (p. 73). Thus, while gender plays a significant role in how tweens are conceptualized by adults, it may have little to do with how they experience gender on their body surface and synthesize these experiences into their identities. According to Vollrath, "Current debates (Thompson, 1995, 2004; Wilson, 2004) concerning the subject matter of children's drawings...demonstrate that examining the relationships between children, the media and popular culture create new spaces to represent children as both judicious consumers and creators of individual meaning within visual culture" (2006, p. 69). Drawings become a representation of the complexity of a girl's gaze, illustrating the contradictory social processes involved in the relationship between external social pressures, her experiences of their bodies-as-clothed, and her perceptions of body image in popular culture (Vollrath, 2006). By concentrating

on the work and observation of a single informant on female body representation, my study deepens current analyses of this important topic.

The participant for this study was a seven-year old Latina girl named Madison (name has been changed) whose perspectives on her own body image and body image(s) in popular culture were useful to my analyses of tween identity formation. My selection of Madison was based on the categorization of her age and developmental level as the cusp between one set of experiences (childhood) and another (tween-hood). As tweens range from ages seven to twelve, there is a possible overlap in the years a girl can be considered a child and also (potentially) a tween. Thus, this study also explores the shared discourses of tween-hood and of girl-childhood possible in so young a subject. I accessed the participant through her mother, a friend and former classmate. Madison, her mother and I met informally at her family's apartment before the study began to discuss its requirements and make changes to its format. We agreed to meet twice a week for eight weeks; the first three weeks dealt with photography, the following three weeks involved drawing, and the final two weeks focused on a combination of these two activities and a trip to the local mall. Narrative interviews, formal question-and-answer interviews and informal conversations were constant components to all sixteen sessions. Except for the trip to the mall (which comprised the final session), all other meetings were held in the participant's apartment. For the sake of privacy, Madison requested that our time together be spent in her bedroom and so the material items surrounding us—clothing, shoes, magazines and makeup—inspired much of our dialogue. A typical session involved the participant and I sitting on her bed or floor talking about her possessions and interacting with them through drawing, photography, handling the items or playing with them. The sessions were structured casually, with no time limit and no

direction other than completing drawings and taking pictures. As a result, these two objectives took up a small portion of each meeting as I encouraged the tangential discussions and alternative activities initiated by Madison. Lastly, all of the material items mentioned in the supportive data were the participant's own. For example, she subscribed to a magazine referenced throughout the following quotes called "J-14." I provided only drawing supplies and a camera.

### **Theoretical Basis for Research Methods**

In order to position very young girls as negotiators of particular discourses within popular culture, "We must first work to denaturalize childhood by calling into question key assumptions through rhetorical, historical, and feminist re-readings of the particular knowledges. This helps to render childhood not as innocent but as multiple, gendered, and contingent" (Vollrath, 2006, p. 71). To do so, I use Pomerantz's (2008) poststructural lens to frame my methodology and my role as researcher. According to Pomerantz, "Poststructuralism raises critical concerns about what it is that structures meaning, practices and bodies, about why certain practices become intelligible, valorized or deemed as traditions, while other practices become discounted, impossible, or unimaginable" (2000, p. 25). She adds that "Poststructuralism is particularly suited to moving beyond binary thinking toward the 'as yet unnamable' which begins to proclaim itself when categories such as 'aspiration' and 'girlhood' remain undecided" (Pomerantz, 2008, p. 23). She used a poststructuralist lens in her ethnography to discuss how girls fluctuate between resistance and conformity to meta-narratives concerning western female body image.

While her study focused on teenaged girls, this feminist perspective is useful to my study because it suggests the possibility of a similarly sophisticated identity management mediated through popular culture sites in tween-hood. In addition, it challenges the assumption of tween conformity because it upsets the traditional adult practices (such as drawing conclusions solely through observation of rather than discussions with the child) characteristic of child-participant research.

A poststructural framework also acknowledges that by virtue of their privileged status, adult researchers are a colonial mechanism and thus a potentially detrimental “cog” in a study’s structural wheel (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002). Mitchell & Reid-Walsh (2002) point out that “Children are frequently conceptualized by adults as developing as objects of socialization and...lesser than adults in that they are progressing towards the goal of mature adulthood” (p. 39). A poststructural approach to research methods implies minimizing my presence to prevent swaying the participant’s behavior. Mitchell & Reid-Walsh add that “Although it may be challenging to invoke an insider decolonized view of childhood, it is worthwhile to pursue it for what it can tell us about the expertise of children generally (in other words, children’s knowledge when they are not being constrained by an adult perspective)” (2002, p. 79). Case studies are widely accepted as a democratic form of child research due to their minimal adult influence and focus on data elicited from the child participant (Flick, 2009). As Vollrath argues, “Such studies must emphasize the viewpoints of the girls themselves if it is to have any democratic legitimacy and avoid repeating the colonizing adult assumptions of the past” (2006, p. 76).

In addition, child-participants are keenly aware of the power dynamics in a researcher-participant relationship and often try to provide what they believe the adult interviewer wants to

know. In other words, the child enters the study with presumptions about adult expectations and the adult holds preemptive assumptions as well. A poststructural case study attempts to invert this asymmetrical power balance within the researcher-participant relationship by assigning an authority to the participant's perspectives. Driscoll describes this destabilization as a "strange imbalance" (2002, p. 79) in which an understanding of the legitimacy and authority of the girl-child's perspectives must precede any analyses performed by the researcher. She argues that:

The authenticity of a researcher's interpretation of a girl's claim to value a particular interest or align with particular discourses is not subsumed by the legitimacy of the girl's claims unless girlhood studies itself locates an authoritative perspective on girls. This assumption depends both on a conception of experience and on an investment in the truth-value of what are presumed to be naïve or unreflective cultural positions (2002, p. 168).

While I established parameters for the study's focus (body image and popular culture) my analyses present the participant's perceptions of body image as elements of her own identity work in constant development. I believe this poststructuralist framework illuminates the complexity of these experiences at an age considered simplistic and predictable.

### **My Identity as Researcher**

My interest in fashion, my academic experiences with western tween-hood and my own memories of growing up a heterosexual female have played a significant role in the direction of this study. Ramazanoglu (2002) states that, “Political commitment is an extricable part of the process of social investigation” (p. 54). In light of this assertion, I admit to viewing very young girl-children, tweens and teens dressed “provocatively” at the public schools where I substitute teach with concern. In addition, I view aggressive marketing schemes aimed at young girls with a wary eye and I suspect that media exploitation may play a role in how young girls address their own body image(s). Fortunately, however, I can also draw on my past experiences as a teen when suggestive styles become too personally troubling. For example, I clearly remember dressing too “provocatively” for my parents’ taste and clothing myself to impress the opposite sex; I also remember enjoying being swept up in any kind of popular trend in music and apparel, etc. While my style has changed I remain intrigued by fashion and trends as they wax and wane. To conceptualize my dual position as one-time insider in tween subculture and my current stance as “adult outsider,” I draw from standpoint theory, which suggests that “One can only know about experiences in which one has partaken...while insiders can offer valuable perspectives, little can be learned from outsiders (those who do not share ethnic, age, gender or class ties with those they study)” (Ramazanoglu, 2002, p. 58). The power imbalance between adult and child may theoretically make completely authentic interpretations impossible, but the legitimacy of my approximations may increase based on the commonalities we share (young and female) and my former experiences as a heterosexual girl-child, tween and teen. From this dual position, I attempt throughout my analyses “to try to rethink how (my) social location can be used as a

resource in spite of the fact that (the participant and myself as researcher) are members of different groups” (Kirsch, 1999, p. 15).

My research also falls under the category of Girlhood Studies, a synthesis of several social sciences disciplines that highlights the experiences of female youth as unique within and instrumental to the formulation and reconstitution of gender within contemporary western and non-western societies (Driscoll, 2002). This academic field is described as “a sub-genre of recent academic/feminist scholarship that constructs girlhood as a separate, exceptional and/or pivotal phase in female identity formation and focuses not on reifying a unified notion of girlhood, but on dismantling the fictions around which the category of ‘girl’ have crystallized” (Driscoll, 2002, p. 111). The theoretical assumptions underlying Girlhood Studies fit well with my research methodology because of the shared poststructural emphasis.

While Girlhood Studies is often aligned with feminist imperatives, its multidisciplinary focus comes from its location in the broader category of Cultural Studies. The attention within Girlhood Studies to girls’ relationship to popular culture, socialization processes and cultural practices is abundant (Driscoll, 2002). To balance this emphasis, however, the ordinary, everyday rituals emphasized by Cultural Studies include a diverse range of discourses and practices not confined to popular culture (Driscoll, 2002). As Driscoll (2002) states, “Under the heading of everyday life, Cultural Studies focuses on the routine negotiation of identities and cultural locations, including familial, work, and lifestyle patterns, the occupation of social spaces, and language” (p. 178). The elevated importance of “everyday occurrences” in the Cultural Studies field lends itself to my research, as it illustrates how body image within popular

culture manifests itself in the day-to-day choices and habits shaping the participant's identity negotiation.

### **Case Study Research Methods**

My research is defined as a “case study,” which is characterized by an exploratory nature and the researcher's desire to comprehend the complexity and individuality of a single individual or phenomenon (Flick, 2009). Qualitative by nature, case studies elucidate the complications and contradictions within an individual's interactions with or use of particular discursive phenomena (Flick, 2009). My research therefore attempts to elucidate new puzzles that disrupt current evaluations of tweens by removing the oversimplified, “outsider” framework used to conceptualize their lived experiences with and perceptions of body image. Like Kirsch (1999), I “aim not to discover singular truths or assume that these truths are described in a singular voice, but rather reveal the conflicting points of view emergent in the data” (p. 13).

I began my research with the intention of employing the tangible, finished products of two methods (photo-voice and drawing) as partial evidence of “methodological triangulation” to ensure that my analyses could replicate themselves in several forms of data. However, while the participant often initially embraced each photography or drawing task with a willing attitude, she was frequently unable to complete these projects in my company or alone. She was easily distracted from tasks by the prospect of conversation concerning the ideas she had for the drawings and other related ideas connected to the drawing. For example, several photography and drawings sessions were easily sidetracked by the participant's eagerness to discuss what the assignment reminded her of, such as a figure in popular culture, her favorite outfit or a new hair

style. In addition, she forgot to complete all of the assigned photography and drawing tasks that were supposed to be finished in my absence between sessions. Thus, the complexity of the tasks often proved too difficult for her to maintain a long-term interest without outside encouragement and while I managed to take some pictures of her, we were unable to complete any substantial drawings during our sessions together. Despite these seeming limitations, the rich dialogue that emerged during her attempts to complete the activities evolved into my primary research focus. Instead of methodologically encouraging the participant to complete a drawing or a series of photographs, I began each session with a photography or drawing task and allowed the subsequent sequence of events and conversation(s) to emerge from this initial topic. This necessary change from “product” to process and my emphasis on themes emerging in our dialogue (rather than finished artistic creations) occurred about mid-way through my study. My participant's responses affirm Golomb (2004), who argues that, “The act of drawing becomes a vehicle for the expression of personal fantasies that are embedded in emotionally significant themes of a collective nature and thus provide the means for participating in the shared imagery of youth culture” (p. 161). The participant often eagerly provided detailed descriptions of her intentions for the photographs and drawings without actually desiring to pick up the camera or pencil and create. In light of this, Simpson reminds us that “It is important to note...that children are not really creating art but are working on developing a complex system of visual communication and are frequently more interested in the process of making than the resulting product” (1998, p. 43). Inspired and excited by these initial descriptions, she then continued to provide a flood of tangential information related to the subject matter she desired for her imaginary creations; *these topics delved deep into the participant's perspectives on body image*

*within popular culture and provided insider suggestions of self-image work within the tween subculture.*

In addition, while the platform activities and focus on body image remained a constant, the data inevitably changed between the photography and drawing activities. These permutations provided rich contradictions that enriched the validity of my analyses. I also realized that if photography and drawing were merely platforms that enabled rich dialogue and provoked imaginative self-reflection from the participant, I could expand these platforms beyond the visual arts altogether. Maintaining my focus on dialogue (rather than medium or context), the participant and I walked through the local mall, and in doing so, I was able to observe her interactions with the material culture around her. These contexts are arguably quite different-- private (the participant's apartment) versus public (the mall)-- but the participant's engagement with body images was strikingly similar across these locales. Since I was interested in how the participant interacted with specific popular culture icons, persons, and images, her reflections on a popular male movie star's body at home in one of her magazines were as equally informative as looking at a poster of him at the mall. Because my methods shared a common basis in bodily aesthetics the participant was able to provide multiple viewpoints and angles on the same experience--her perceptions of body image in relationship to popular culture--using different media and within varying contexts. Context was important in shaping the "situatedness" of the participant's reactions; however, I am confident that the thematic constant (body image) underpinning the study outweighed the differences in the contexts themselves. The informant's consistency in evoking particular discourses across disparate contexts reinforces the legitimacy of their juxtaposition within a single study. In light of the changes in my study's focus and the

methods I employed, my research design ultimately recognizes “progressive focusing,” in which initial research questions may be modified or even replaced mid-study by the case researcher (Flick, 2009). As Flick describes it, “Progressive focusing involves a gradual ‘honing in’ of the study’s focus while simultaneously recognizing the complexity of the relationship between the subject and all other elements that make up the case” (2009, p. 46). As the study progressed, a gradual narrowing of my analytic focus allowed me to rethink puzzles as they arose.

Secondly, I employed the “narrative” interview method throughout my study (Flick, 2009, p. 153). Narrative interviews center on the stories the subjects tell and on the plots and structures of their accounts (Flick, 2009). These stories may come up spontaneously during the interview or be elicited gradually through the interview process. Flick (2009) states that when stories continually appear, “This reoccurrence supports the view that narratives are one of the natural cognitive and linguistic forms through which individuals attempt to organize and express meaning and knowledge” (p. 138). The narrative technique proved to be a successful strategy with this participant because all of the initial questions from which the participant worked to create her drawings and photographs involved a personal story: the photographs and drawings were based on questions that asked her to “tell a story” in pictures. Simpson et al. also discuss the importance of story by observing that a narrative elicited through a particular medium, such as a drawing or talk about a drawing, “becomes a means for the child to understand herself and world with which she must cope...the child, in her own stories, is creating situations that are suited entirely to her own needs and desires, that deal directly, though symbolically, with her own immediate concerns” (1998, p. 167).

Lastly, I styled my interview questions and data gathering techniques to suit the age of the

participant. As she is a very young child it was important to use age-appropriate questions and create tasks that were essentially enjoyable (Ewald, 2001). For example, I relied on Ewald's (2001) suggestion to keep questions short and simple and to avoid posing more than one question at a time. My choice to use the photo and drawing methods also referenced recommendations by experienced qualitative researchers to create an interview comprised of tasks other than simply sitting and talking (Ewald, 2001). Mitchell & Reid-Walsh (2002) state that "Interviews with children may preferably take place within the context of some other task, such as drawing, reading a story, watching TV or video, or playing with dolls and cars" (p. 146). Drawing and photography as points from which the interview material was gathered removed the immediacy and pressure typical of the face-to-face method.

**Chapter II.**

**Theoretical Bases and Data Analysis**

### **Western Contemporary Tween-hood**

Because the participant displayed evidence of the discursive tenets and behavioral patterns of western tween-hood, I identified her as a “tween” and began my background research with tweens as a social milieu and as a life stage. Current research describes tweens as a feminized and sexualized social category, a group racialized as white and a prominent, middle class marketing and merchandising category (Driscoll, 2002). Tweens are also identified as individuals between the ages of seven and twelve who exude a combination of the discourses of girl-childhood and a futuristic progression towards aspirational discourses, which often materialize as “older” and more “mature” body image(s) and behaviors. While these factual characteristics are relatively stable, the tween girl also exists as “both as a biographical person and a commercial persona who resides in an unstable cultural space where ambiguities of social identity invite, even tolerate polysemous renderings of who ‘she’ is” (Driscoll, 2002, p. 225). Depictions of tween girls within research are thus bound up in contradictions and tensions. Studies attempting to locate tweens in their respective discursive realms are often difficult, as “they are not merely ‘in between’ but are always in an ambiguous and fluctuating ‘somewhere’ ” (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2005, p. 204).

### **Body Image**

Several theorists attest to the role of the gendered body as a set of symbols reflecting the culture within which it resides. For example, Butler argues that across all cultures, “The gendered body is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of acts within a highly regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being”

(1990, p. 33, in Driscoll, 2002, p. 86). Reflecting on Foucauldian conceptions of body surface, Bordo (2004) similarly argues that far from being fundamentally stable, “The body is constantly in the grip of changing cultural practices” (p. 179). She hypothesizes that images of the 'microcosm'--the physical body--may symbolically reproduce central vulnerabilities and anxieties of the 'macrocosm'-- the social body (Bordo, 2004). This crystallization of culture upon the body surface is not an act of repression of the instinctual or natural body. Instead, there never was a 'natural' body (Bordo, 2004). She points out that, “Cultural practices are already and always inscribed on our bodies in their materiality, their forces, energies, sensations and pleasures. Our bodies, no less than anything else that is human, are constituted by culture” (Bordo, 2004, p. 142). The body is therefore a powerful symbolic form, a surface on which the central rules, hierarchies, and commitments of a culture are inscribed and reinforced through the concrete language of the body (Bordo, 2004). Lastly, the body is not merely a text of culture; it is also a practical, direct locus of social control through banal and seemingly trivial routines, rules and practices (Bordo, 2004). Bordo makes the following assertion:

Culture is 'made' body, converted into automatic, habitual activity, not chiefly through ideology, but through the organization and regulation of the time, space, and movements of our daily lives; our bodies are trained, shaped and impressed with the stamp of prevailing historical forms of selfhood, desire, masculinity and femininity (2004, p. 178).

Within western culture specifically body image is not an individual aesthetic but a

process of simultaneously producing, recording, and consuming the self (Pomerantz, 2008). For the purposes of this paper, “body image” is a set of symbols comprised of both the physical attributes of the female human form that signify the aesthetics required to achieve the dominant feminine ideal and the material goods that aid this achievement (Wolf, 2002). From this process of redefining the self, “The female body within western culture may be viewed as a surface on which conventional constructions of femininity are starkly exposed to view, through their inscription in extreme or hyper-literal form” (Bordo, 2004, p. 171). Western body surface can also be conceptualized as a capricious juxtaposition of symbols. As Grosz (1994) explains,

The notion of corporeal inscription of the body-as-surface rejects...the psychoanalytic postulate of physical depth...rather it can be understood as a series of surfaces which is...energies and forces, a mode of intake, a discontinuous series of processes, organs, flows and matter. The body does not hide or reveal an otherwise unrepresented latency or depth but is a set of operational linkages and connections with other things, other bodies (p. 120).

Rather than existing as a singular whole, the body is made up of separately functioning pieces that coalesce to produce a subjective self. This subjectivity is not the static summation of pieces but an “assemblage” of parts that work independently to produce multiple meanings.

The body surface as a set of meanings becomes a public sign for the “wearer” of a particular assemblage of symbols, an emblem of identity for tween girls that projects certain biases and values. Driscoll (2002) indicates the extent to which attitudes towards dress mark

girls as particular types implicit in feminist dress reform movements, school uniform regulations, and fashion designers: “Postmodern fashion is a function of sex or...a secondary sexual characteristic...postmodern girls are mass consumers and producers of fashion who record and thus materialize fashionable identities” (p. 244). Pomerantz similarly acknowledges that body image provides a range of already sanctioned codes for coherence and recognition to be cited by girls in pursuit of identities (2008). Her ethnography focuses on the clothed body as the signification of a public persona or performance, the body as a zone of public cultural inscription constantly re-shaped by the individual within or against broader socio-cultural requirements and examines how adorned body-surface-as-image symbolizes the interchangeability of girls’ identities (2008). She does not attend to what is worn by her teenage female subjects but what is accomplished in the wearing: “Dress is a mode of signification, of articulating subjects; it forms both intelligibility and individual subjects as intelligible” (Pomerantz, 2008, p. 2). Clothing specifically directs people’s attention to the body and creates the body as perceptible and qualifiable. As public performance, “Clothing is what enables others to evaluate us as bodies...in our clothes, we are judged, look at, wondered about, envied, remembered, discriminated against, lusted after, admired, respected, and ignored” (Pomerantz, 2008, p. 18). It becomes an entrance into and an exit out of girls’ shifting and contextual identities, a medium by which meaning is ascribed to the body. Its role as such renders the body-as-self as a fluid text in which wearers bear messages about who they are and how they might want to be treated by others (Pomerantz, 2008). Pomerantz also disputes the misinterpretation of girls’ style as generalizable and superficial, instead arguing that it represents a layered and chameleonic “deep” surface in which social texts are written, rewritten, contested and discarded (2008): thus, “Style

becomes the observable, public layer that covers the hidden, private later of the corporeal self” (2008, p. 26). But like the mind and body, these two layers are neither wholly distinct nor wholly unitary, as body and style complement each other, reinforce each other, and socially sculpt each other (Pomerantz, 2008).

Another aspect of tween-hood is the self-initiated manipulation of the body surface to construct a heteronormative femininity. Western culture interpellates tween girls into a process of bodily manipulation to render the body surface as a set of codes that imply a superior “intelligible body” (Bordo, 2004, p. 186). This occurs because the body is dominantly imagined within western culture as belonging to the “nature” side of a nature/culture duality, and thus the less “manipulated” a body one has, the more uncultured and uncivilized one is perceived to be (Bordo, 2004). Bordo also argues that “Such preoccupation may function as one of the most powerful normalizing mechanisms of our century, insuring the production of self-monitoring and self-disciplining 'docile bodies' sensitive to any departure from social norms and habituated to self-improvement and self-transformation in the service of those norms” (Bordo, 2004, p. 186). She adds the following:

This body surface includes our scientific, philosophic, and aesthetic representations of the body-our cultural conceptions of the body, norms of beauty, models of health, and so forth. But the same representations may also be seen as forming a set of practical rules and regulations through which the living body is 'trained, shaped, obeys, responds,' becoming, in short, a socially adapted and 'useful body.' (2004, p. 181)

In relation to this systemic pattern, Madison's bodily manipulation was part of a normalizing process that reproduces the type of femininity specific to this discourse and is based on her self-identification as “becoming woman.” Bordo asserts that:

Indeed, female bodies have historically been significantly more vulnerable than male bodies to extremes in forms of cultural manipulation of the body. Perhaps this has something to do with the fact that women, besides having bodies, are also associated with the body, which has always been considered woman's 'sphere' in family life, in mythology, in scientific, philosophical, and religious ideology. (2004, p. 142)

### **Aspirational Identity**

Tween body image is also characterized by the discourse of aspiration, the foil to girl-childhood that plays a pivotal role in pre-teen girls' identity politics. "Aspirational identity" describes the phenomenon of preteens acting and dressing in ways constructed as appropriate for chronologically older individuals. It typically emerges in the negotiative relationship a tween forms with the pre-existing discourses of popular culture. Aspirational identity also refers to a desire to replace a perceived "lack" within one's representation of "self" with something bodily or interest-related that is typically framed within tween-hood as older, forbidden, and desirable. Driscoll captures this preoccupation with a desirable, forbidden "future" when she states that "Girlhood and daughterhood are consistently articulated in relation to a future role--who or what the girl will be or do as a woman" (2002, p. 108). Driscoll views perceptions of contemporary girlhood as inseparably linked to aspiration: "Girls--in the sense that we now use the word--encompass no specific age group but rather an idea of mobility preceding the fixity of womanhood and imply an unfinished process of personal development" (2002, p. 47). In addition, Mitchell et al. (2005) describe the association of upward mobility to aspiration:

Ideas about progress and the social order are produced throughout concepts of linear time through assumptions of natural, age-related stages of linear development in youth...youth is produced as a life stage in a series of progressive steps towards an adult future. Young people are therefore constructed as "becoming" (2005, p. 15).

While problematic in girl-childhood, aspirational identity is accepted as a fundamental aspect of

tween-hood because the body image that creates tween-hood on a girl's body surface relies on a mixture of child-like and “mature” signifiers considered congruous with the emergent subject-formation/biological-development paradigm (Driscoll, 2002; Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2005).

### **Aspiration as Adolescent Subject Emergence**

While adolescence is related to subjectivity more generally, I would suggest that the way a girl-child transitions to tween-hood via an aspirational discourse through body image is also a function of adolescent subject emergence. It represents the ideological, internal shift from one body of discourses to another which is then initiated by the subject as a particular body image on her body surface. *Subjectivity* refers to a person's perspectives, feelings, beliefs, and desires and is characterized by unsubstantiated personal opinions, rather than knowledge and fact-based interpretations (Wikipedia). It is a state of being unique to the individual person, made knowable to her by the specific qualia (subjective quality of conscious experience) available *only* to *her* conscience (Wikipedia). Subjectivity is also a state of mind that can be expressed in a multitude of avenues and locales according to the discourses and resources available to the subject. In other words, one does not need to have access to the material objects that might accurately represent one's subjective state in order to be a subject; the mind's desires and sense of knowing can separate from the state of the body that contains it. Therefore, there is a potential disconnect between the meanings assembled on the tween's body surface and the impulses or inclinations she may feel. This mind/body split which the tween works to eliminate creates a form of Cartesian dualism, which Grosz (1994) defines as “the assumption that there are two distinct, mutually exclusive and mutually exhaustive substances, mind and body, each of which inhabits

its own self-contained sphere” (p. 6). This split “has evolved into a polarized hierarchy whereby the one becomes the privileged term and the other its suppressed, subordinated, negative counterpart” (Grosz, 1994, p. 10). Compounding the mind/body split is its gender coding, as females (historically perceived as “closer to nature” than males) are continually aligned with the capriciousness of the body (Grosz, 1994). Constructions of femininity and childhood are often similar in nature and their intermingling on the girl-child’s body produces her as a symbolically loaded site (Grosz, 1994). Women are continually framed as passive and dependent members of society and as Higonnet (1998) argues, “It is tempting and easy to liken women to the children who have also been constructed in these terms and furthermore idealized” (p. 142). Mitchell et al. (2005) maintain that “Girls may be even more sensitive to such discursive shaping, for they are held within a dualism which posits children as animalistic or primitive and females, by virtue of their physiology, as closer to nature than men” (p. 35). The girl-child is thus presented with a difficult double standard: she is both a “natural,” uncontaminated creature devoid of rational thought *and* feminized through sexist portrayals as an “earthy,” organic being. These factors, along with the potent physical remnants of the discourses of girl-childhood (to be discussed later) within a girl’s transition to tween-hood present her with a special challenge to “prove her subjectivity.”

This “struggle” for subjectivity is known as “adolescence,” and western social norms automatically overlay puberty onto adolescence as the socially “correct” time to initiate this transition. As Driscoll states, “the representation of adolescence as identity formation and identity crisis relies on the physiological trauma and psychological crisis of puberty...puberty both defines the boundaries of adolescence and asserts its importance” (2002, p. 81). For

example, adults often attribute middle-schoolers' "erratic" behavior as coinciding with their entrance into puberty. The physical markers of puberty, such as body hair, breasts, and menstrual cycles afford these individuals consideration as "proper" adolescents and thus their "temperamental behavior" is dismissed as typical. Driscoll (2002) posits that:

The pubescent body makes vividly visible something apparently prior to culture but also instantiates the self's place in culture. Puberty is a representation of the gendering of the body, which doesn't mean that the body before puberty is gender neutral but, rather, that before puberty the gender of the body is to be an inadequate and perhaps unstable map of the body (p. 180).

Ideas about puberty have therefore helped define discursive distinctions between child and adult, tween and teen and girl-child and tween.

However, when understood purely as the process of becoming subject and detached from its "storm and stress" model, adolescence has little to do with pubertal chronology (Driscoll, 2002). This distinction between adolescence as process rather than as product (of multifactorial storm and stress) is crucial. Driscoll argues that, "Despite how obviously puberty seems to define a boundary between girlhood and womanhood and a field for female adolescence, adolescence is not a clear notation of any age, body, behavior or identity, because it has always meant the process of developing a self...rather than any definition of that self" (2002, p. 161). This detachment of adolescence from a predictable chronology allows both childhood and preadolescence to remain indeterminate of a timetable. There is no definitive line when a child

“stops” being a child and becomes a preteen and when a preteen “stops” being a pre-teen and becomes a teenager. If adolescence is theorized to be independent of physical factors, a girl-child can be an adolescent without experiencing puberty. This uncoupling of puberty and adolescence explains much of the difficulty attributed to the development of a feminine subjective self because “Overarching models of physical maturity do not provide a foundation for any claim to social maturity” (Driscoll, 2002, p. 86). In this way, adolescence is seen as “expressing a tension, a disjunction, between (physiological) maturity and (social) majority” (Driscoll, 2002, p. 86). This misalignment creates an uneasy “crease” in the emergence of subjectivity along the predictable linearity of child-to pre-teen-to-adolescent-to-adult. As a result, adolescence continues to be viewed as a disruption of childhood and a time prior to a projected, stabilized adulthood (Driscoll, 2002). Driscoll states that “Adolescence...retrospectively constructs childhood as a period of stability, heightening both the crucial intensity of adolescence as a transformative passage and the distance between childhood and maturity” (2002, p. 194). Adolescence therefore produces childhood as an innocuous stasis free of subjectivity and if adolescence is constructed as a chronological parallel to puberty, any separation represents a violation of cultural requirements. Seven year olds like Madison are thus perceived to “race to the finish line” of tween-hood by dressing like twelve-year olds or “skip it” altogether, while eleven-year olds may still bear a stylistic resemblance to six-year olds. As Driscoll (2002) posits, “The sexuality of puberty, while not at all connoting sexual subjectivity, connotes a naturalness to sex that is conferred to the subjective development of adolescence” (p. 211). From the construction of this linear sequence, acceptability is measured by a timely deployment of the prevention and progression of sexuality relative to age.

### **Aspiration as Subject Emergence: Data Support**

Narrowing my focus from a general discussion of adolescence, this section examines how adolescence-as-emergent-subjectivity might function within aspirational tween body image. The concept of adolescence as process is critical to the legitimacy of my analysis because it explains Madison's preference for a body image attributed to individuals much older than herself. Therefore, I consider how the development of a subjective self through adolescence functions as a girl-child's voluntary distancing from the discourses of "childhood" to then take up the practices and self-identification with "tween" body image. I suggest that a tween's aspiration towards a particular body image as adolescent subjectivity has two defining characteristics. The first is the girl-child's conscious rejection of the discourses of childhood in favor of an aspirational "other." The second is the emergence of independent choice and a sense of control over her own body image as she gradually embraces this "other" (creating her as "tween"). Pomerantz's (2008) concept of "identity" supports this continual "creative destruction": "The usefulness of "identity" as a theory comes from its radical re-signification within poststructuralism, where the subject is far from complete and stable. Instead, "The self is always partial and unfinished, contingently forming and reforming in relation to others, social structures, and our own multiple and contradictory subject positionings" (p. 16). She adds that, "In synthesizing this unified character, the beauty routine and the fashionable look are synecdotic of the process of adolescence" (2008, p. 245).

My study's participant consistently demonstrated this sense of willingness to "cross over" into an alternative discourse from the body-image of her girl-childhood. The following excerpt reflects this sequence of rejection and her taking up a "new" identification with an alternative

discourse, an act she considers to be independent choice. However, what the participant expresses here also indicates a desire to shed the body image of girl-childhood *while still experiencing* girl-childhood. She claimed to have been less effected by the clothes at those ages than at the present, but a mild and residual resentment nonetheless exists. As a result, the participant's emotion towards how she dressed *then* versus *now* was informed by a long-held desire to be something “other,” rather than a sudden longing to switch. Desire was building in response to suppressed manifestation.

\*Note: italicized words in all following transcriptions indicate an emphasis in the participant's tone of voice.

Allison: What kind of style did you have when you were younger?

Madison: Well...um....momma dressed me mostly...I mean I *definitely* did not want to wear the boy's clothes! So I sort of told her what I didn't like but let her pick out what I did like as long as I liked it. *But I sort of let her pick them out, and she'd be all like, this looks soooooo cute on you!!!!* It's like I guess I didn't care, but then it started to get so annoying after a while because everything she picked out was looking kind of babyish, like that rufflelely shirt.

Allison: The one that's plaid and ruffled? The one you said was kind of boyish?

Madison: Yah, that one.

Allison: How did you feel about your mother choosing clothes for you?

Madison: Um....Well some of it was just really ugly and she'd come home with it and be all like, *Surprise! Look what I got you!* And I'd be just like *ugh*...but not like right away because I sort of didn't care when I was really little, like, um..like a baby...but then it was getting kind of weird, and I'd see my friends wearing like this *really, really pretty outfit* and I'd *want* it!

Allison: Did you like to shop at that point in your life? How old were you when you were feeling this way?

Madison: Um...I dunno... a few years ago....I think I sort of did....but *now I get to go to the mall!* (with exaggerated excitement.) And momma lets me pick out some more clothes now...she still comes home with clothes but when I see them if I don't like it I'll be like *nope!*

Allison: How did you feel about your mother coming home with clothes for you?

Madison: Well....now it's annoying but *sometimes* like *never* she picks out the good stuff and most of the other stuff is all yucky! So I go with her and she's like this looks *sooooo* adorable on you, I'm going to buy it and I'm like um *nooooo* you're not!

Allison: I remember feeling the same way at times, but I was a lot older than you when I started wanting my own clothes!

Madison: Yah, momma doesn't like how I like to dress (smiles widely).

I intentionally used the term “style” in the opening question of the foregoing dialogue to see what parts of the body and what bodily manipulations the participant would emphasize in her response. Pomerantz (2008) discusses style as an amalgamation of pieces--hair, makeup and clothing--that coalesce to form a set of meanings; the participant, however, seemed to feel that clothing possessed the most potent significations of meaning and had the most impact in inscribing the discourse of “girl-child” on her body surface. Madison's memories of how she dressed were the most emotionally charged. She seemed to take the greatest pride in the stylistic difference between the clothing she wore in the past and the clothing she wore now and this pride centered around a sense of control she now feels over her clothing choices. The versatility of clothing may allow the girl-child to witness the wide variety of ways in which clothing can arrange the discourse of girl-childhood on her body. In experiencing this as Madison has, she then perhaps projects this potential onto clothing reminiscent of an alternative, aspirational discourse. The emphasis on clothing in girl-childhood to produce a particular set of meanings, its evocation of a strong gender bias, may prompt girls to view clothing as the most effective expression of a particular discourse. Thus it becomes the central focus of altering one's body surface to project a new, desired discourse. Marketers appear equally cognizant of this power of

clothing; Cook et al. (2004) report that clothing is the most prominently featured symbol of “tween-hood” sold to tween consumers.

It is important to note, however, that while the central tenet of western girl-childhood—a heavy bias towards traditional feminine appearances and behavior—remains relatively stable, the aspirational discourse(s) a tween chooses to take up in place of girl-childhood are arbitrary. In other words the “type”(s) of femininity and/or masculinity the tween gravitates towards are wide open in comparison to the rather static attributes of girl-childhood from which she departs. There is a broad range of discourses available to the tween-in-progress once she decides to reject girl-childhood in favor of an aspirational “other.” For example, a girl-child may transition to an aspirational other by taking up a body image reflective of traditionally male attributes in clothes and physical comportment. Tween culture is of course overwhelmingly dominated by a conventional femininity similar to the girl-childhood it leaves behind (Russel & Tyler, 2004). However, the homogenous nature of tween consumer and popular culture does not account for the individual responses tweens may make to its generic nature. It is the ideology that exists within popular culture that is one-dimensional, not the individuals it attempts to interpellate. For example, while research indicates that the majority of western, white, middle class tweens take up this dominant, aspirational discourse, countless counter-studies attest that the degree to which they internalize it varies widely, ranging arbitrarily from resistance to partial appropriation to complete acquiescence (Driscoll, 2002). In Madison's case, the newly adopted discourse resembled the discourse of girl-childhood in the fact that body surface in both discourses was highly manipulated to produce a conventionally feminine aesthetic.

Lastly, it is important to remember that the discourses available to particular social groups

in any given society are limited and that the dominance of particular discourses undoubtedly plays a persuasive role in the tween's gravitation towards particular discourses over others. As Driscoll contends, "All fashion presents standardization as one possible response to the social imperatives of feminine adolescence" (2002, p. 245). The homogeneity of dominant discourses in tween culture certainly attests to the potential narrowing of discourses available to the emergent subject. However, while this interpellation is strong within western culture, it does not *physically* force individuals to manipulate their body surface to produce a particular image. The choice is based, rather, on influential environmental persuasion and individual reactions to it. Driscoll (2002) argues the following:

This does not mean that individuals do not *consciously* pursue goals that in fact advance their own position. But it does deny that in doing so they are consciously directing the overall movement of power relations or engineering their shape. Nor does the fact that power relations involve domination by particular groups entail that the dominators are in anything like full control of the situation or that the dominated do not sometimes advance and extend the situation themselves (p. 245).

Consequently, it is essential to conceptualize the emergent subject from the viewpoint of post-structuralism as a derivative of a much larger set of cultural negotiations, the created process "she" is not totally free to embody as she desires; instead, "she" "creates a limited and predetermined position through the use of discursive knowledge and through the negotiation with and against competing discourses within a specific historical moment and space" (Driscoll, 2002,

p. 222). Despite these limitations, as the body is altered to adjust the power relations between opposing sets of culturally-mediated discourses, this identity work must still be produced (however unconsciously and inadvertently) by the subject (Bordo, 2004). The individual must invest the body with meanings of various sorts that may affect their perceptions of or relations with other sources of power (Bordo, 2004). When this is accomplished, “Only then can we see how the desires and dreams of the subject become implicated in the matrix of power relations” (Bordo, 2004, p. 171). Moreover, by examining this productive process on the part of the subject we can illuminate the mechanisms of domination in the processes through which meaning is produced in everyday life (Bordo, 2004). In this way, the physical body becomes an instrument of power. Madison used her body surface to retaliate against her mother's control.

Allison: How does this clothing make you feel?

Madison: *Happy!* And grown up...and *really pretty!*

Allison: How does it make you feel these things?

Madison: Momma says that I tend to look like a sixteen-year old and she gets *really* upset over that.

In another discussion about different sets of apparel, I asked Madison the same question:

Allison: How does this clothing make you feel?

Madison: *Haaaaappppppy!* It makes me feel like I'm growing up. Mommy says it tends to make me look like a seventeen-year old and she doesn't like it!

In strikingly similar responses, the participant appears to relish her mother's dissatisfaction with

her current clothing choices. She perceived a clear transferral of power (mediated within who controls decisions about her clothing styles) from her mother to herself.

The physical features of the clothing styles Madison *rejects* point to features of the current inverse or “resistant” body image she now desires. The following excerpt from a discussion highlights the types of apparel she dislikes for its “childishness.” While the participant and I rummaged through her closet, I asked her to pull out any apparel she no longer liked and tell me about it. After retreating deep into her side of the closet (her brother's shirts comprised half of the closet space), she emerged with a ruffled, light green dress with puffed sleeves. Pink bows lined the neck and the bottom hem, and the bows were surrounded by glistening beadwork. Our conversation follows:

Madison: This was like my mom's *favorite* dress on me when I was little and it's so gross, I hide it in the back of my closet! And it's *annoying* because she won't let me get rid of it because she like..ugh, she wants to keep it forever! But we're actually gonna give it away soon to my aunt cuz' her daughter needs a dress and then poof! *It's gone!* I should go hide it under the bed in her room.

Allison: When did you get this dress?

Madison: I had to wear it for parties and...and really anything sometimes, like school stuff that was sort of important. It's so babyish and worse it's not even cute! And I'd always try to get it off because I thought I looked so stupid in it. I mean, I sort of liked it at first but I was really little and it just got annoying really fast.

Allison: What specifically didn't you like about it?

Madison: It's just..I don't know, I didn't feel like it fit me anymore. It didn't fit my look.

Allison: What do you mean? Can you explain this further?

Madison: Well, it just got old...I mean I was seeing all of these other clothes that were *way* cuter and way more, like, “me.” I dunno, it's just not me, it's from my mom. I felt like some silly little baby wearing it! Like people would look at me and be like, *Ohhhhh that's Madison?! Yikes!*

Two divergent themes emerge from this conversation. The first is control: the association the participant made between the dress and her mother. She identified her mother as the reason she was forced to “look” a certain way. Within her mother's control, the participant recognized both the act of imposition and the resulting “babyish” body image she projects. Madison's comment that she “always tried to get it off” reinforces the idea that while she may not have been fully aware of what other types of feminine or masculine body images existed, she knew that she did not feel entirely comfortable projecting *this* particular body image. The second is creative, emergent identity construction: she was able to identify what constituted the “not her,” even if she did not yet know what *was* or *should be* her. Following this recognition, she self-identified with an alternative body image. Madison spoke of her “new” understanding of the “new her” as something she thought about and decided upon: “It's just...I don't know, I didn't feel like it fit me anymore. It didn't fit my ‘look’ and ‘I mean I was seeing all of these other clothes that were *way* cuter and way more, like, ‘me.’ I dunno, it's just not me, it's from my mom.” Such comments represent not only a desire for separation from parental control, but an active rebuttal using a newly identified alternative. She was able to identify and reject what constituted the “not me” based on a new allegiance to what *felt* more authentically “her.”

On another occasion, I brought up the subject of dress-up, a pastime stereotypically associated with girl-childhood. Because the participant seemed unable to recall any clothing from her girl-childhood that felt authentically “her,” I was curious as to whether or not she might have sought out clothing other than her own to fill this need and what the clothing items might have been. Certain types of “dress up” are clearly examples of an aspirational discourse as dress-up is associated with a self-initiated glamorization of the body through “grown up”

clothing, accessories and makeup.

Allison: Do you ever play dress up with your own clothing or somebody else's?

Madison: *Oh yes!* All the time! But not really with friends or anything, I sort of do it by myself.

Allison: Whose clothing do you like to wear?

Madison: Um, mostly my own.

Allison: Really? Do you ever borrow your mom's clothes?

Madison: Um, no, her clothes aren't that cute! I have more heels than she does, her look is more like, um...like sports or something. She's always working so she doesn't dress up that much.

Allison: Why do you prefer your clothes?

Madison: Mine are just way cuter and better for a girl my age, and they actually fit me! My mom's stuff is all too big, and she doesn't really have much sassy, pretty stuff.

Allison: Oh, cool! You can look right in your closet, then, I guess. That's convenient. How do you play dress up with yourself?

Madison: What do you mean?

Allison: Like, when you play dress up, what clothes are you picking out, and how do you go through the motions of actually playing dress up?

Madison: Um, let's see...well I pick out the clothes that are the prettiest, and then I'll just wear them all together and look at myself in the mirror...or sometimes I'll be playing with my toys and I'll wanna wear something nicer for when I play.

Allison: What are your pretty clothes? How do you decide which clothes are the prettiest?

Madison: Well I know which ones they are ahead of time, like each time I want the same clothes over and over again.

Allison: Are you picturing anything or anyone in particular when you play dress up?

Madison: Um...like how good I look. Or sometimes I'll imagine one of the boys seeing me in it.

Allison: Oh ok, so you think quite a bit about what you're going to wear and why!

Madison: Oh, yah.

This dialogue reveals that Madison's mother's body image did not function as a positive learning tool; if anything, it further narrowed the participant's perception of what *not* to do. Her negative reaction to her mother's sense of style parallels the negativity she associated with the body image of girl-childhood. This might be conceptualized as Madison's process of narrowing towards the discourse of “pretty” in tween-hood, a body image that depends on its disassociation from both the body image of grown women and the body image of girl-children (Driscoll, 2002). The idyllicism of the “discourse of pretty” within tween body image was reinforced by the participant's assessment of her mother's style as “sporty.” She connects an athletic body image with womanhood, driving the discourse of pretty even further into tween specificity. This of course is an experience unique to the participant; the discourse of pretty is a staple of grown womanhood as it is in tween-hood and many girls might describe their mothers as women who project “prettiness.” However, I suggest that the participant's unique perception of her mother's clothing as “sporty” might prompt her to confine prettiness to her own tween-hood realm more aggressively and on a stronger bias than other girls with “pretty” role models. Therefore, the “mother” as a figure from which girl-children and tweens learn what to accept and reject in relation to their own discursive position is influential: from their mothers, girls learn what to desire and what to reject, what is appropriate for women and what is acceptable for tweens. Such binaries are rooted in how girl-children, tweens and teenagers assess their mothers against themselves.

As noted above, Madison may conceptualize a particular type of aspirational prettiness as confined to tween and teen-hood because it cannot exist in the womanhood of her immediate surroundings nor the girl-childhood of her past. After analyzing the preceding conversations and

recognizing the participant's emphasis on clothing I decided to conduct a short drawing activity that would illuminate her perspectives on body image as clothed-body. The activity consisted of a set of questions from which Madison could choose; her task was to complete a drawing that answered one or more of the questions. As the session progressed, the participant decided to turn her drawing into a magazine:

Allison: So on the cover, how about drawing the most beautiful clothing you can think of?

Madison: For the *inside*, *first* I'm going to make the *articles*, and I'm going to use a pen, and make it kind of like it's a princess.

Allison: Ok, so then let's think of an article...hmmmm.

Madison: *One*, *describe* it, *two*, where you would wear it, and three, *about* it! And how you *feel about it*.

Allison: Ok, ok.

Madison: So...(She starts rehearsing the words above to herself softly again as she picks up the pen to write these words down in the binder). So one, describe it...

Allison: What are we going to describe? The colors, textures?

Madison: (After much writing and a long silence, she confidently reads what she's written). A red shirt with *black* stripes. I'm going to make it a little bit teenaged, not too little so people would buy it...so I have to be kind of *serious*...so a red shirt with black stripes, and a...black...flowered leggings....because see at the bottom it has little flowers on it (referencing the ankle area). Hey, can I sell these to my friends to get money?

Allison: What do you think you can do?

Madison: Um.....*sure! Sure!*

This dialogue reflects a process of elimination that has brought Madison to associating prettiness

with a maturity just slightly beyond her current age and discursive location as “tween.” Her own experiences with girl-childhood confirm this artificial sweetness, while womanhood has been represented by an important role model (her mother) as “sporty.” This narrowing is evident when the participant says, “I’m going to make it a little bit teenaged, not too little so people would buy it...so I have to be kind of serious.” Thus, teen-hood emerges for her as a likely point of identification for desirability and prettiness. It is both slightly beyond the participant's discursive location as “tween” and therefore presents her with a greater sense of subjective power than she can capably handle at this moment. Teen-hood also presents qualities she is not quite ready to embrace herself (she feels the need “to be kind of serious,” rather than just “be” as she is), but are nonetheless attributes she considers “selling points.” To Madison, being a teenaged girl is perhaps the ideal, aspirational manifestation of the discourse of pretty (and all of the grown-up “liberations” of being a teenager) to be taken seriously by prospective magazine subscribers to this imaginary publication.

In conclusion, adolescent subject formation as a function of tween aspiration implies multiple possible interpretations for a pre-teen girl as she attempts to define for herself what it means to “become a girl” and embody girlhood by transitioning away from the generic body image of girl-childhood. This transition is an exploration of the discourses available rather than a “fixed” agenda (despite the fact that many girls like the participant may display, from an early age, a singular preference for one body of beliefs). Lastly, it is important to remember that this ideological evolution is a series of fleeting moments of indefinite time, an instant that cannot be divided into chronological increments but rather is fluidly and individually experienced by the girl herself.

## **II. The Transition to a Self-Initiated Manipulation of Body Image**

## **The Transition to a Self-Initiated Manipulation of Body Image**

This section identifies three factors involved in the participant's increasing use of her body surface to express a subjective self and experiment with identity: tween body image within popular culture, tweens and consumerism, and the body image of girl-childhood.

### **Tween-hood and Popular Culture**

The first factor contributing to the participant's body image-manipulation is the meaning and importance of body image in popular culture and the unique relationship between popular culture venues and tween girls. Driscoll (2002) defines culture as a “contested and conflictual set of practices of representation bound up with processes of formation and reformation of social groups. These definitions are about negotiation, emphasizing the ways culture is made and changed” (p. 173). Applying this definition to the western, white, middle class subculture, the relationship between the mass media and preadolescent females is positioned within a larger society saturated with persuasive visual imagery generated by electronic media. Technology has made knowledge available to all age groups because “It represents a societal development characterized by a return to visual and oral observation at the expense of text” (Russell et al., 2002, p. 623). Given this context, the interface that develops between tween girls and popular culture can be characterized by as the process of interpellation, which is:

the way in which a social context or discursive regime 'calls you into being' and names you as a particular kind of person. Interpellation refers to a mutual recognition wherein society, sometimes manifested in an individual or an institution, recognizes you and you

recognize that recognition and are called into being by that exchange (Russell and Tyler, 2002, pg 623).

Interpellation occurs in an ideological exchange between tweens and the media and socialization apparatuses that urge them to want to be a particular kind of subject (Russell and Tyler, 2002).

While interpellation occurs between all social groups and the socializing forces that produce them as such, interpellation between tween girls and popular culture is often uniquely identified as a process of commodification: “Commodified as both consumer and marketplace, the girl is interpellated as not only the space in which 'Woman' will be delineated but also, because of this incompleteness, as full of diverse possibilities for self-production. This feminine adolescent identity is the ultimate commodity on sale to girls” (Driscoll, 2002, p. 175). Tween girls are interpellated into a relationship with the ideologies of popular culture as consumers and producers of a distinct sub-culture that separates them from other social groups by a “quest” for feminine adolescent identity. This aspirational quest for a particular type of self is manifested primarily through consumerism. What’s consumed, however, are not just material objects symbolic of a feminine adolescent ideal, but also a constant flow of ideologies that construct and present this ideal to tween consumers (Driscoll, 2002). In other words, tweens are consumers and co-producers of particular types of identities through their relationship to popular culture (Driscoll, 2002).

Girls are not confined to mere imitation, however, but rather are productive members within the interpellation phenomenon and create this relationship as a negotiative process, rather than one-directional absorption (Driscoll, 2002). They co-author their own stories within the

larger cultural narrative. As Driscoll notes, “Identification is always more productive than imitation, and it is the connective process rather than the product that is necessary to an identification as 'becoming' ” (2002, p. 89). Current research highlights such multiplicative and resistant identity work done by girls in response to dominant cultural forms. Despite these fresh perspectives, however, girl culture itself-in its dominant representations-remains a subculture characterized by conformity to this adolescent feminine ideal. As Driscoll expresses, “Girl culture is often presented as an exemplary of cultural conformity, an attribution explicitly dependent on the dominant modern gendering and codification of maturity and conformity to the mainstream...The girl market thus contributes to the valorization of terms for cultural production and consumption” (2002, p. 56). Thus, the postmodern splintering and fragmentation featured in current research is occurring broadly and at the individual level but often typically as a response to or permutation of a normalized standard. Perhaps the most important element in the interpellative relationship between popular culture and tween girls is the self-identification of tweens as a body of experience and a discourse standing between childhood, teenagers and womanhood distinct to their predecessors (children) and followers (teenagers and women). Recognition of this has generated the creation of the tween as a specialized identity within popular and consumer culture. As Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (2002) observe,

Popular culture venues directed towards tweens provide a way for girls to stake a claim for themselves as young and female. In this way, 'tween' (as a commercially-produced social category within popular culture) does the same work for young girls that female teen culture did for teenagers a decade or so ago: acknowledges them as having different

interests and ideas from older females as well as boys their age (p. 102).

### **Body Image within Tween Popular Culture**

Body image remains the dominant symbolic locus within popular culture from which the discourses comprising this adolescent feminine ideal emanate (Wolf, 2002). The tangible and visceral quality of the body is privileged because the divisions of self-other and subject-object are not only visually reinforced by popular culture but are also visual by necessity (Driscoll, 2002). According to Driscoll, “We can never see the body image of another, only our interpretation of their relation to norms and dominant tendencies among images of the body—that is, in relation to our own body image. Body image thus supports a fantasy of sociality: that others see you as you see yourself” (2002, p. 238). The continual processes of reforming body image characteristic of tween popular culture thus suggests a prolonged and vacillating mirror stage, or “an endless production of different unities that are never certainly separate from the body” (Driscoll, 2002, p. 239). She posits that, “The feminine adolescent desires herself as she might become—a potential visualized in connection to other girls and constructed through observation of her and other girls' bodies” (2002, p. 238). Moreover, with the pervasiveness of movies, television and internet communication, the rules required of the dominant feminine body type have come to be culturally transmitted more and more through standardized images (Bordo, 2004). As a result, femininity itself has come to be largely a matter of constructing the appropriate surface presentation of the self; girls learn the rules of bodily discourse through images that tell them what clothes, body shape, facial expression, movements and behaviors are

required (Bordo, 2004). Reflecting on the glorification of a particular body image and its association to an enticing set of meanings, Dentith (2002) speaks of the misrepresentation of female empowerment as sexualized body-image, focusing specifically on adolescents enmeshed in third-wave ideology in the highly sexualized context of Las Vegas:

Openly advertised sexual devices, magazines, sex shops, clothing, and billboards displaying the female body are pervasive...these preponderant practices indicate specific ways that expanded notions of capitalism have successfully placed market value on one's body...Women who posed nude and chose to work in the sex industry were venerated by the study's adolescent participants as icons of the "new liberated women." They deemed these female moguls clever and intelligent for choosing sex work, and identified them as free agents with new status and economic independence (p. 458).

Unfortunately, as Dentith continues, even "What appeared as liberation actually reinforced the public practices and ideologies of patriarchy that sustain women's subordination within a larger society...the objectification and subordination of women becomes invisible, so to speak, in light of the power gained through economic means and a certain media popularity" (2002, p. 458). Here, we see the intersection of body image, popular culture and the interpellation that mediates the relationship between viewer and image and the negotiative process that occurs in this interpellation.

### **Tween Body Image, Popular Culture and the Participant**

Madison consistently demonstrated this construction of “self” in relation to an ideal “other” across the various popular culture venues with which she engaged throughout the study, including magazine reading, television watching and shopping. A continuum was evident between the ideal body--a generic motif running through the television series, movies and magazines witnessed by the participant--and the “editing particulars” she practiced within her own body image. Her relationship to popular culture played a pivotal role in her use of an aspirational discourse to increasingly define her identity work through body image. Moreover, within this “editing” process, the participant would often times identify a singular characteristic of a pop star's physical appearances, rather than desiring a “whole” image. I believe that this splintering reflects careful identity work characterized by measured “timing” on her part to acquire the physical characteristics of a discourse in “safe” doses and increments. In other words, Madison reproduced the discourse in a modified, incremental version that 'worked' for her as an individual. The following dialogue occurred while we were flipping through her “J-14” magazine; Madison spotted a celebrity and reacted to her hairstyle:

Madison: *Ooooooooooh I want to do that...like the way she does her hair...see the way she has different highlights in her hair (She points to a picture of Selena Gomez, an teen actress who has caramel highlights in her hair.) But instead of that, see she has my color hair.*

Allison: Do you want to do that to your hair as well?

Madison: Sort of, instead of that I'm going to do it a little bit lighter brown.

Allison: Oh I see, so you are planning on getting those? (I'm referring to the highlights.)

Madison: Oh *yah!*

Allison: Is there anything else about her you like or don't like?

Madison: Well yah, sort of everything, but really you can't do it all at once...because....well it costs too much!

Allison: Can you think of what this “everything” consists of when you look at her?

Madison: Um....just like, well her hair for the first thing, but then she's got the makeup and the lip gloss and her nails are awesome....but I don't think I'd wear it all with *that shirt!*

Allison: What do you mean?

Madison: Well some parts of her look good-um, I mean she looks good all over but you can't do the shirt and the makeup and the hair and the nails because it looks kind of...too much for a girl her age. And she's supposed to be all sweet and stuff on her TV show!

Allison: So no shirt, but the rest is ok? Why is the shirt the problem?

Madison: Well you gotta be careful with all of the stuff because too much....all at the same time is...sassy, like sexy.

Allison: What combination of stuff would you do?

Madison: Well...it um...(Her voice trails off for several seconds as she collects her thoughts). It's like it depends on how you want to look. Like you can do the shirt but then *not* all the makeup! Or maybe all the makeup with a lesser-showing shirt. But you can't do *both* because then you look pretty sexy!

The preceding quote demonstrates how the participant carefully measures what “pieces” of the pop star's image work together properly to stay within the current discourses's parameters of acceptability. Wearing “everything at once” is too sexy, and thus the individual parts of the body image must be broken apart and extracted for the way in which their individual meaning(s) work to create a cohesive whole. In the following conversation, on the other hand, Madison took an unusual turn in her descriptions by recognizing this “wholeness” as a *desirable* “package” to emulate when posing for pictures. This recognition was directed not only to her own body image in pictures, but to the “ideal” body image of popular singer Miley Cyrus, whom she relied upon

as a model for achieving success as a photography subject. The conversation occurred as we were taking practice pictures for an upcoming photo shoot, which we then reviewed together:

Allison: So what I'd like you to do is tell me which one you don't like or do like. (I then scroll through the pictures for her).

Madison: This one right here.

Allison: So why this one?

Madison: Um, that one...I like it...

Allison: Is there a reason why?

Madison: Um...just like it, it's better than the other ones.

Allison: Why is that?

Madison: Um, cuz' it looks like the girls in the magazine!

Allison: Any girls in particular?

Madison: Mmmm...Miley Cyrus...I kind of, um, I didn't just take a picture of her, I took a picture of her in a magazine, I took a picture so I rewinded to back when I was at the concert (a Miley Cyrus concert she attended recently) and she was all rubbing on the boys at the concert.

Allison: Can you show me the picture in the magazine that you're thinking of?

Madison: Yep. (We flip open the magazine I brought and look through it until Madison spots a picture that interests her.)

Madison: Ok *one*, I looked at this picture.

Allison: What did you like about the picture?

Madison: I liked the way that she posed....

Allison: Can you think of what specifically about the pose you like?

Madison: Um, yah I dunno...just the whole look I guess. Like everything looks good together.

Allison: Can you name anything in particular?

Madison: Um, no...it's like, it just all looks awesome, like it doesn't look like she's trying or something.

This dialogue demonstrates that the participant was also able to recognize that pictures represent a summation of individual parts to produce a coherent set of meanings. She clearly understood that a photograph is an instantaneous collection of meanings that coalesce on the picture surface for the viewer. This is different than manipulating her own body surface from day-to-day, as she was referencing in the discussion about Selena Gomez's hairstyle and revealing shirt.

### **Tween Body Image, Popular Culture and the Participant: Magazines**

The role of these images as learning tools is another important function they perform within tweens' relationship to popular culture. Driscoll (2002) argues that "Tween popular and consumer culture is particularly shaped by a pedagogic approach to femininity--they not only recognize but foreground training in being a girl, as well as the tensions between living and knowing the body and between lived and ideal bodies (p. 97). Likewise, the participant was not only negotiating and choosing what is desirable but also implicitly learning what constitutes desirability. Magazines served as a potent source of learning for Madison, whose mother paid for her monthly subscription to a tween magazine called "J-14." The pedagogical aspect of tween culture concerns the content of such magazines more so than girls' responses to them although the response desired from readers is always one of learning characterized by eager compliance, earnest curiosity and an identification with the content. Driscoll notes that, "These

magazines are guides on how the girl becomes the desirable woman...the girl of tween popular culture is a body/subject in process, a collage of identification and discipline through a profusion of technologies of the self” (2002, p. 97). Tween magazines are another facet of the movement to create a specialized material culture devoted to the interests and desires of tweens. The ideology embedded in their content has been heavily researched for its effect in creating an instructive relationship between reader and content. This relationship is characterized by an interpellation of the reader through her negotiation of particular discourses manifested in the aesthetic presentation of the girls pictured in the magazines. While some tween magazines such as “American Girl” have diversified their focus away from the dominant adolescent feminine ideal by publishing articles on sports, travel and friendship, the magazines self-selected by the participant overwhelmingly focused on a particular body aesthetic--the erotic. Driscoll argues that eroticized images of girls in tween magazines compel the reader to “verify herself endlessly, to identify all her bodily parts, and to fashion continually from this corporeal and psychological jigsaw puzzle a total picture, an imago of her own body” (2002, p. 247).

Tween magazines such as J-14, television shows, and material culture sell a generic brand of “girl” which embodies all the idyllic physical attributes required by the dominant aspirational discourse. “She” may be adventurous, smart, athletic and courageous (referencing another discourse within tween-hood that calls upon the girl to be “everything at once), but across these variations she almost always possesses an ideal body image. This combination of personality, intellect and physical appearance promotes the idea that while the “inner person” is critical to success, it is ultimately unattainable without a pretty face and petite frame to match. Often, however, (and especially in tween magazines like J-14), the “complete” girl is simply physically

beautiful; in fact, “achievement” in sports or academics was nonexistent in Madison's issue of J-14. Instead, the magazine focused on gossip concerning celebrity heterosexual relationships, provided advice to readers about love and reported on the latest trends in beautification. The content of the magazines dictated the “important” knowledge to be learned. Madison was very comfortable with the consumerist, instructional nature of the magazine's content:

Madison: Mmmm. I like this magazine.

(She spots a mini-feature going down the side of one of the pages and reads the article's headlines aloud): “Winter's hottest nail shades.”

(She then spots the first nail shade featured and begins to evaluate each shade. There are nine nail shades shown, painted in different colors and accompanied by a description of what makes the shade attractive. She points to the first shade.) Definitely! (Evaluating the nail shade's trendiness.) (Then the next): Sort of. (The next): Sort of. (The next): Kind of. (The next): *Yessss*. (The next): *Nooooo*. (The next): *Yes*. Oh is that purple or is that blue? (She brings the article close to her eyes and says): It's a...oh it's blue. Hey I have that color! Oh and I have that color too! And I have that color too! And that color.

Allison: Is that the color you're wearing?

Madison: No. I'll save up for em' though...

As we continued to flip through the magazine, the participant again identified a particular hair style (and type of hair) as desirable. She noticed a picture of a pop star with long, wavy hair:

Madison: I sometimes want hair like that.

Allison: You want hair like hers?

Madison: Yah, my mom, um, my grandma curls it, but like since my hair is shorter the curls are much bigger, and they look much cuter and they come up to *here* (shows this hair length with her finger). And it looks better in a pony tail with a thingy *right here* (motions to the back of her scalp) and my hair gets lighter. And then I'll put some sparkle glitter stuff in it so it's all shiny and looks like...like really nice.

Allison: It gets lighter in the summer?

Madison: Yes, no it gets lighter when I curl it and put it back in a pony tail.

The participant's detailed description of how she manages this hair style (with the help of grown women) illustrates a pedagogy framed by learning the techniques necessary to achieve the style. These techniques were already known to the participant before seeing this image in the magazine but it is the image that prompts her to connect an ideal type of hair (what she sees in front of her) with the previously learned processes necessary to create that hairstyle. Therefore, the image not only teaches the participant what styles are desirable, but reinforces past learning about hair styles as important information for continuing to achieve a particular ideal. The pedagogies of past and present are brought together and reinforced for the future in the viewing of a single image. As Driscoll states, “‘Woman’ remains the future while the reader remains the adolescent-desiring to be the most ideal girl possible and in need of advice and products in order to enable that becoming” (2002, p. 77).

In conclusion, the body remains the focus throughout popular culture as the instrument by which subjectivity (that is denied to girl-children) can be demonstrated visibly. However, the basic message mediating through these bodies is their surface presentation, which promises a public acknowledgement of subjectivity to those who alter their appearances accordingly. In fact, while the body appears to be the predominant instrument used by tweens for subjectivity and sold to them by marketers, I believe that girl-children entering tween-hood might adopt *any* medium offered by popular culture, provided it showcased the subjectivity they seek to prove they possess. For example, “rebellious” music often accompanies a girl-child's self-initiated body stylizations as she transitions into and through tween-hood. This music performs the same function as her body image, although in a less tangible and perhaps less accessible format.

## **Tweens and Consumerism**

The nature of tween consumerism and the participant's behavior as a consumer of body image(s) in popular culture are additional factors contributing to her shift towards bodily manipulation to produce a particular body image. The relationship between tweens and popular culture venues involves an interpellative transmission of ideological values that then evolves into a negotiative and productive relationship with tween consumers. Driscoll argues that

Commodities are also cultural signs...they have already been invested, by the dominant culture, with meanings, associations, social connotations. Many of these meanings seem 'fixed' and 'natural.' But it is only because the dominant culture has so fully appropriated them to its use that the meanings have come to appear as the only meaning which they can express. (2002, p. 219)

A recurring motif within discourses of tween consumerism has been the ways in which capitalist regimes produce an ideology touting consumerism as the standard by which girls attain an idealized feminine appearance. Driscoll (2002) concludes that, "While each of these various influences on the relationship between gender and consumer culture may look like harmless fun, each one adds to subtle pressure to be physically perfect" (p. 233). Normalization and profitable marketing are closely intertwined in the preadolescent commercial sector, with corporations gendering their products through advertisements that showcase a dominant, idealized and feminized body image. This "brand" of ideology is manifested in the material goods with which tween consumers engage. As discussed earlier, the expansive reach of this discourse throughout

tween culture and its manifestation in tween material culture is also due to the fact that tween consumerism has experienced an explosive transition characterized by specialization over the past two decades (Cook et al., 2004). The products tweens consume have evolved into a highly distinctive marketing sector: “Tween commercial culture is a niche market pertaining to a younger pre-adolescent and young adolescent age group exclusively or almost exclusively female and possessing...a distinct commodity culture” (Mitchell et al., 2005, p. 6). This specialization is based on an exclusive emphasis on particular aspirational body images that create a relationship between a dominant body image and the popularity of tween products to produce this image (Driscoll, 2002). Thus, in cultural systems there is no “natural,” inherent meaning, but only negotiated meaning. Objects and commodities “mean” only because they have already been arranged, according to social use, into cultural codes of signification (Driscoll, 2002.)

The consumerist practices tweens exhibit are also unique for other reasons. As Driscoll (2002) states, “It is not that they (tweens) consume (everybody does) or that their sexuality is in fact bound up in commodification, but that they are perceived to derive an inordinate amount of pleasure from commodification and commodity fetishism” (p. 189). Tweens spend more than fourteen billion dollars annually on clothing and although the traditional boundaries of the market have been defined as eight to fourteen, research indicates that children as young as six have specific style preferences (Cook et al., 2004). Dozens of labels, whether in the form of online retail sites, magazines, physical stores or a combination of all three, exist to cater to the incessant material demands of the preteen market (Cook et al., 2004). Moreover, Russell et al. (2002) cite an ever-intensifying corporate creativity and sophisticated marketing merchandising

strategies aimed at tweens in the U.K.: “Extensive research has been conducted which emphasizes that shopping “occupies a pivotal place both in shaping and manifesting this relationship” (p. 624). Such data corresponds with market research in the United States indicating that pre-teen girls are twice as likely as any other demographic group to visit a shopping centre on a weekend (Russell et al., 2002). Consumer strategists contend that tween girls represent a much better niche market than tween boys, as “Girls represent ‘predictable economic items’ such as accessories, clothes, make-up and shoes--the ‘stuff’ of contemporary feminine consumer display” (Russell et al., 2002, p. 624). An intense focus on the potential profitability of preadolescents has emerged since the early 1990’s, a decade in which clothing makers and entrepreneurs of childhood redoubled their efforts to define a tween market space based on a fluctuating continuum of objects, clothing, and their associated meanings (Russell et al., 2002). As the authors state, “Pre-teen girls are a brand...Contemporary preadolescents have designer label taste and the buying power to match... kids between the ages of eight and twelve are a market designers want to capture” (2002, p. 624).

### **The Participant and Consumerism: “Buying” a Body Image**

Madison's propensity towards “buying” a particular body image “brand” was evident in her discussions of what she intended to purchase during our trip to the mall, and this propensity vacillated between restraint and unbridled desire. The following excerpt reveals Madison's knowledge of the connection between elation and cautious consumption in the consumerist message:

Allison: So what are you going to spend it on?

Madison: *No* idea! I'm trying to save to twenty dollars.

Allison: Well maybe when we take our trip to the mall, you can find something you like there and use it then, if you want.

Madison: No actually there's a lot of stuff I want! But it's like I don't have the money for all of it.

Allison: If you had the money, what would you buy?

Madison: *Oh my God*, like *everything* in the stores! There's a *gazillion* things I always want all the time and I asked Santa for Christmas but it's not gonna come.

Allison: What are some of these things you want?

Madison: Well for Christmas stuff I asked for a laptop, a...cell phone, an Ipod and a... Guitar Hero, but I already asked momma and she said maybe Guitar Hero but that's it. And then there's stuff I just want want, like everyday I notice stuff, and maybe that should be on my Christmas list too because it all costs *a lot* less than an Ipod!

Allison: What would these everyday things be?

Madison: Oh, like all these clothes and shoes and makeup stuff! There's just tons of em' that I want that I see...like I need *more black leggings* cuz' I only have two pair and they go with everything, and then some...um... high heels with rounded toes and maybe *one* pointy pair, I think. And there's this straightener that I want so bad but momma won't let me have it because she's always like *Madison* your hair *is* straight! But it's *not!* See it curls here and here (motions to these areas on her head with her fingers). See I'm gonna need a whole new bedroom for all my new stuff!

Allison: What kind of makeup would you buy?

Madison: *Lip gloss lip gloss lip gloss!* And I'm a little scared of it cuz it's so pointy but *maybe* some eyeliner to try it, but only on the top part (of her eyelid).

Allison: Anything else?

Madison: Glitter eyeshadows, tons of those because you can never have enough of them! And you need the certain kinds of colors that go with certain outfits. And some sparkle stuff for my hair, and some hair things so I can tie it up pretty, and....(Giggles)...*Oh* I want to *go to the mall*. When are we going to do our mall crawl?

Allison: I know, we'll do it in about two weeks; we'll make it the last thing that we do.

Madison: Oh and you know what, my cell phone...see...there's these things you can buy on them to make it look girly, like pink sparkles and stickers! But first I hafta get momma to get me the phone!

Desire and restraint were also often juxtaposed in the same discussion as she wished eagerly for more money while acknowledging how little she had and thus how carefully she had to spend it. The next discussion, on the other hand, highlights the participant's wariness of expensive items and a savviness in finding the cheapest option possible:

Madison: Let's go to Amazon, I want to show you a shirt I got.  
(She types in the web address and locates the products on the website. The page opens).

Allison: Is this one brand new?

Madison: Yah, its um, it's a shirt, I got it pretty cheap on Amazon, I got it for five bucks.

Allison: Not bad! Good job.

Madison: And then these are like twenty-seven bucks and they're like *so* cute and I got one that's like so cute, but really cheap!

Allison: So you got the best for the least amount of money.

Madison: Yes!

Allison: Got it.

Madison: So you just go here (moves mouse), type in "girls...and black and sparkly shirt... and...(Her voice trails off as she takes the time to type the words "girls", "black", "sparkly" and "shirt").

Allison: Have you gone on Amazon a lot?

Madison: Um, no, this is only my second time....and you have to be careful not to go on a lot because you see lots of stuff really cheap and then you want to....you might spend your mom's money with your card...but it's pretty easy. So, see look at all these. (She scrolls through all the shirts listed for sale on Amazon).

In the foregoing segment, the participant's desire was characterized by a fantasy concerning money that manifested itself in an excitability about the “joy” of spending power. Despite her lack of financial resources, the products desired by the participant were consistent within the aesthetics of the aspirational body image paradigm. This jubilation over the concept of money itself--its potential to buy happiness in the form of certain products--sharply contrasted with the participant's views towards regulating her own spending and her price awareness. For Madison, money seemed desirable in its abstract form--the potential to buy oneself an image--and this excitement points to her knowledge of tween material culture's accessibility through money. Money was conceptualized by Madison as the key to accessing a particular material culture that would enable her to perform an aspirational discourse. However, she was forced to regulate her spending and leave much of this desired culture in this *desired* (rather than *realized*) state.

The following discussion demonstrates Madison's sense of the negotiable character of the aspirational discourse she desired; she could differentiate between the pricier items inaccessible due to cost and the cheaper items that could provide her with the same “effect.” Thus, she not only possessed a thorough understanding of the material items necessary to manipulate a body into an aspirational discourse, but also how to cleverly work around her financial restraints to achieve this discourse cheaply. This conversation occurred during our trip to the mall as we walked through a department store:

Allison: So, still haven't decided if you're going to buy something or not, or what you'd like to buy?

Madison: I could spend it on cute shoes! Or maybe I could look for some lip gloss... yah definitely, oh and I also *definitively* want to buy some fake nails.

Allison: Why do you want to get fake nails?

Madison: Cuz' they're cheap and they look cute. Don't forget somebody took my money! And *because I cannot grow my nails!* I bite them all the time and I catch myself and I'm like *Madison!* What are you *doing!*

Allison: Do you buy fake nails a lot?

Madison: Oh yah, cuz' they're easy and fun and they don't cost tons of money.

Allison: And you've started biting your nails this year?

Madison: Yah....and it's like I don't even like, um...like I don't know I do it, it's just like it happens...good thing there's something called nail polish in the world, because it keeps them looking *pretty!*

(About twenty minutes later, I ask):

Allison: So where do you want to go? You can tell me.

Madison: Well we can go to the girls section...like the girls my age....I have no idea how to get around this mall! Sometimes I find myself going in circles, and then I'm like whoa, and...Oh *Earrings!* (She whispers this excitedly as she comes across several pairs of earrings for sale on a revolving stand in the jewelry department).

Allison: Do you want to look at earrings?

Madison: *Ah!*

(We walk over to the earrings.)

Madison: Oh I like these! Let's see how much they are.

(I check the price tag for her.)

Allison: "Thirty-two dollars."

Madison: *Whoa...* we better keep *moving!*

Allison: Yes, maybe we can find the section that sells clothes for girls your age.

Madison: Yah! (She then spots another set of earrings) Oh sometimes I like to buy these types (of earrings). (She flips the tag over to look at the price). *Oh whoa...nope nope nope!*

Allison: Maybe we should look for at the five dollar range for earrings.

Madison: Yah. Like five, six or seven (dollars).

Allison: Maybe we could go to a Claire's, something like that...maybe they'll have stuff you can buy.

Madison: She looks down at the floor as we walk...everyone's *staring at me* (She smiles shyly and casts her eyes downward).

Allison: No they're not! You're fine, they're not staring at you...you can look at whatever you want.

Madison: It's weird when you're young, when you see all these cute clothes, but they're not your size. *Oh look at this one!* (She gravitates immediately to a dress).

Allison: It's cute!

Madison: (She flips over the price tag). Oh! Well it's only twenty-two *bucks* but that's going to be too much and then I can only have five bucks left!

Allison: That's true...we can look at the sale rack.

Madison: Look at these look at these (her attention is again taken to another rack of clothing). *Skiinnny jeannns skiinny jeannns* (She sings this softly to herself, then flips the price tag over.) *Nope nope nope!*

As the preceding conversations show, the participant had a premeditated plan to purchase small, inexpensive tokens such as nail polish and fake nails, as well as a pricier item (a pair of shoes).

She in fact did purchase fake nails from Claire's but her ability to restrain herself during even this purchase was clear: the cashier offered her the chance to buy another nail set at half price and she

quickly declined. In conclusion, in comparing the participant's anticipated purchases to her actual purchase, the discourse of pretty seems to exist more in “imaginative buying,” rather than in actual purchases. Moreover, she could differentiate between the prices of items comprising the “discourse of pretty” (fake nails shoes, earrings and jeans) and progress towards this discourse with a coping mechanism of choosing cheap items.

### **The Body Image of Girl-Childhood**

The effects of the discourse of girl-childhood on girl-children is another central component of contemporary tween-hood and factors prominently in the participant's transition to body image manipulation. My use of the term “girl-children” is intentional because the terms “girl” and “child” are insufficiently descriptive by themselves. When joined, their individual meanings could contribute to understanding the unique experiences of a social category of youth. Chronologically speaking, “girl-children” refers to female youth who fall below the age range regarded as “tween” (seven to twelve years old) or who are within the first year or two of tween-hood. The use of age as a marker of particular discourses, however, is not to imply that these important developmental discourses are simply age-bound. There is a certain artificiality to limiting a discourse to age alone, although it is convenient for descriptive purposes. Rather, it is used to point to a constructed alignment of particular discourses with subjective self development that differentiates tweens and girl-children. Age and discourse are synchronized to create the belief that childhood is a passing, chronologically determined phase characterized by certain attributes. However, for each individual the emergence or dissolution of a particular discourse is fluid within a more rigid age category or boundary.

### **The Body Image of Girl-Childhood: Female Bodily Adornment**

Girl-childhood is the by-product of the broader discourse of the Romantic Child, which creates the discursive space for girl-childhood to exist (Driscoll, 2002). Mitchell & Reid-Walsh (2005) assert that “Childhood innocence is constituted as an innate, essential part of all children, an ontological trick which renders the lives of children homogenous...and thus excludes those who have ‘fallen from innocence’ by virtue of these differences” (p. 35). Higonnet (1998) also contends that “Romantic childhood is a... protective device, a system of images that defends children categorically. The logic of the system protects children against sexuality on the grounds that they are asexual... against deceit because they are guileless, against knowledge because they are innocent” (p. 223). The protection *against* something necessitates something or someone that first needs protection.

Throughout the late nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the discourse of the Romantic Child informed girl-childhood by characterizing the western girl-child’s body as the symbolic bearer of pastoral innocence free of “adult” hardships. This relationship between the girl-child’s body and innocence directly contributed to an assumption that little girls are incapable of thinking critically about their own body images and the body images seen in popular culture. The Romantic Child discourse also suggested that girls’ innocent naiveté be protected from the corruptive forces of media and marketing ploys which threaten to replace their “purity” with a knowledge of (and worse) a participation in violent and sexual behavior (Buckingham,1996). Therefore, the term “girl” in “girl-children” also references the gendering of the female body in childhood and acknowledges the way in which discourses of femininity

and childhood both coalesce upon the female body and are demonstrated by certain lifestyles choices.

These specificities suggest that gendering is received differently by bodies that have been socio-culturally situated in different ways according to sex (Grosz, 1994). As Grosz explains, “The body and its privileged zones of sensation, reception and projection are coded by objects, categories, affiliations and lineages which engender and make real the subject’s social, sexual, familial, marital or economic position or identity within a social hierarchy” (1994, p. 140). This coding remains particularly demonstrative upon the western girl-child’s body, in which a series of individual aesthetic manipulations have crystallized into an assemblage of symbols inscribed upon her androgynous figure. Grosz (1994) notes that “Not only does what the body takes into itself effect a ‘surface inscription’ of the body; the body is also incised by various forms of adornment” (p. 141). The girl-child is gendered from birth by a specialized body image comprised of adornments, accoutrements, and a physique that bear her heterosexual destiny. Every inch of her body is coded as feminine: her hair is intricately stylized, clothing colors are typically a soft pastel palette, ears can be pierced and lace, ribbons and other “décor” add detailed stylizations to otherwise simplistic clothing. Driscoll cites Mead’s description of how girls in Melanesia acquire a set of bodily signifiers through socialized practice: “A girl must learn to place herself within a symbolic system...little girls are taught from the earliest childhood years that they are desirable. Baby girls a few weeks old are laden with shell ornaments, earrings...Thus conspicuously they are set off from their brothers, who go about in a naked, unadorned state” (Mead, 1939, p 199, in Driscoll, 2002, p. 152). Such observations demonstrate the universality of this phenomenon, as it appears to exist cross-culturally. The

early body image expression of girl-childhood progresses to the tween's adoption of the body surface as the expression of identity work. A tween—as a result of her childhood—is already typically accustomed to having her body used as an instrument of “display” by her parents/guardians. Her body was already also a significant indication of traditional femininity in her girl-childhood; what changes (through the emergence of the subjective self) is the conscious choice to manipulate the body on one's own terms. These terms are often dramatically different than those formerly imposed by the tween's guardians. Thus, the body does not diminish as the locus; it becomes a locus *chosen by the girl herself* as a point of visible and self-determined “girlhood.” The transition to body as self-initiated instrument of display for a new set of discourses is therefore smooth and logical—the “instrument” remains a constant in this transition, but the perception of its surface changes, enlarges and becomes more self-referent, setting off a potentially life long process of self-adornment. The body becomes the avenue by which subjectivity, negotiation and experimentation can be most freely expressed *for tweens themselves*.

The reliance on clothing, makeup and hair styles throughout this transition is also logical because these items and their corresponding manipulations are easily accessible: girl-children can't alter their physical features before puberty, nor may they have access to the formal knowledge to prove through spoken word that they can act as discerning subjects. It is the very act of her decision, her motion to reject the Romantic Child discourse that truly inverts the innocent passivity assumed of girl-children. This act of rejection, of course, is most powerful and demonstrative when the discourse chosen clearly opposes the ideological tenets and physical features of girl-childhood on her body surface. This may be the reason why many tweens eager

to “shake” the childishness imposed on them since birth choose variations of the discourse of pretty to prove (through body-image) that they are *not* girl-children.

### **The Androgyny of the Girl-Child's Body**

The androgyny wrapped up in the gendering of a little girl's body image furthermore contributes to the tween's eventual use of her body for identity work. As discussed earlier, the female body prior to puberty resides as an “unstable map” or “blank canvas” devoid of a subjective sexuality. This gender-coding designates girl-children as special members of society by refuting the androgyny of their naked bodies with ornamentation in lieu of pubertal development and symbolizes them as feminized innocence. The girl-child's body is marked as androgynous because it is constructed as pre-developmental and pre-sexual. “She” is capable of (heterosexual) romantic feelings but the lack of pubertal signifiers on her naked body belie an impossibility of sexual pleasure and desire manifesting within and from her body (Driscoll, 2002). Thus, the androgyny of the naked girl-child's body is inverted by an imposed, gendered body-surface manipulation that compensates for this “natural” state with a narrow femininity that forces identification as “female.” In other words, through body image, sex is implicated by a gendered “steering” of the girl-child's physique. Moreover, through this manipulation of body surface to produce a particular body image, the girl-child's body becomes a signifier constituted as either acceptable or unacceptable given its cultural requirements (Grosz, 1994). Critical to this gendering process is the fact that girl-children appear to have little choice in creating their own body image and if they do, they are given limited options that conform to the colors, textures, and patterns reflective of a traditional, effeminate, and Victorian ideal. The

immutability of these physical attributes and the girl-child's subordinated status as child often renders her powerless to resist these bodily alterations. Thus, the physical characteristics of the girl-child's body remain relatively static throughout her tenure as girl-child and within the realm of white, middle class and western girl-childhood generally.

In reaction to this enforced erasure of bodily materiality, the tween compensates for her androgyny (the lack of breasts, hips and a menstrual cycle that accord subject-formation) with an aspirational body image. Throughout this transition to an emergent subjective self, then, the girl-child begins to use her body as an aspirational symbol of self-hood by reinventing her androgyny as malleable and visible materiality. This materiality is constituted through the new and self-initiated symbols that coalesce on her body surface to produce a meaning-laden body image which opposes androgyny by being identifiable with recognizable signs of masculinity and /or femininity. For example, following this identification of her own body surface as a new platform for identity work, Madison gained an unprecedented power by reclaiming her body image as independent of her mother's influence. From this power granted through self-directed bodily manipulation, Madison reinvented the meaning mediated from her body surface by identifying herself with a new genre of "girl" (her chosen femininity, the discourse of "pretty"). This manipulation of body surface strove to reach a specific "end result" and she continued to rely upon the body (increasingly so) from these points forward to negotiate and regulate what constituted the acceptability required to remain within this genre.

### **"Looking Cute"**

I now describe an additional component of girl-childhood critical to the reproduction of a

Romantic body image on the body surface of girl-children and the participant's increased emphasis on identity work through body image. The concept of “cuteness” in girl-childhood may be based on the erasure and invisibility of the girl-child's body as a potential part of the process of adolescence, replacing this latent subjectivity with a gender-coded re-writing of the body surface-as-text using the qualities of feminized girl-childhood: sweetness, innocence, naïveté and “cuteness.” These qualities are not only imposed on the girl-child, but they may over-write whatever alternative ideas and opinions she might feel otherwise feel. Much like her androgyny, this erasure renders the body invisible beneath its outer layer of gender inscriptions by parents, guardians, etc. Looking “cute” also displaces the girl-child's body from its natural materiality into a reconstitution distorted by an assemblage of physical features that are constructed as “pugnacious.” Anne Higonnet (1998) argues the following:

One might reasonably assume that photographs are supposed to record a particular real moment, and that photographs of bodies are supposed to document real bodies. Not quite, in the case of children. The most popular images of children today are photographs, because people want to see real children. But, at the same time, people don't. Photographs of children that appeal to a large consumer audience have to accomplish simultaneously two contradictory goals. They have to make children look physically charming, but not intentionally. They have to provide child bodies to their audience without making those bodies enticing or even available. They have to allow us to enjoy the shot of children and to think “cute,” not “desirable,” let alone “sexy” (p. 77).

In support of her claims, Higonnet (1998) examines the schematic patterns evident in two world-famous child photographers and finds that both manipulate their child-subject's bodies into an illusory immateriality: "Cameron stages an imaginary world for children to inhabit...Cameron's children wear eyelet lace, straw hats and angel wings. They inhabit an idyllic rural world...in which the passage of time seems halted, in which people stay young and beloved toys remain in use: no polyester plush or garish plastic, only a gentle, pastel haze" (1998, p. 80). Higonnet makes a similar observation about the work of photographer Anne Geddes: "With Geddes' work, we get to see the baby's body and yet not see it. We get to take pleasure in the sight of the child, but we don't take our pleasure too seriously" (1998, p. 85). Often physical features are presented in a way reminiscent of animals that exhibit the same mannerisms assumed to be possessed by the girl-child. Since the western Victorian period, for example, girl-children have been likened in both written word and visual imagery to any animal that is soft, cuddly, sweet, passive, delicate, gentle innocuous, etc. (Higonnet, 1998). Girl-children have been featured alongside these creatures in popular representations (such as holding them in an embrace), as well as anthropomorphized into half-animal, half-girl-child hybrids (Higonnet, 1998). These images can resemble fairies, ducks, doves, rabbits, sheep, kittens, puppies etc. The discourses written upon these animals and dainty mythical creatures therefore become the discourses written upon the bodies of girl-children in popular mythology. As Higonnet contends, "Photographs of romantic children that exude physical charm have become one of our culture's most ideal ideals, and so ads use photographs of attractive children relentlessly. Ordinary consumers therefore encounter the photographic romantic ideal of childhood ceaselessly" (1998, p. 92). These images are the

timeless stuff of postcards, wall décor and nursery rhyme illustration books.

The aesthetic of “cute,” however, has more recently come to dominate media venues aimed at the girl-child market *itself*, not just adults seeking nostalgic representations of girl-childhood. “Cuteness” as a marketing pitch to girl-children has been manifested through a broad array of digital media and material objects, such as movies, television, and internet games and takes iconographic form in figures such as “Bratz” dolls, “Dora the Explorer,” “Kim Possible” and the “Powerpuff Girls.” The dominant “figure” across these venues is the figure of the girl-child heroine, a cartoon girl-child who stars in TV programs and internet games and has a flood of products for sale related to her persona (backpacks, watches, jewelry, etc.) Moreover, similar to their Romantic, paper-back predecessors, the bodies of these girl-child heroines are exaggerated to produce a pugnacious, doe-eyed, bobble-headed aesthetic of “cute” that exaggerates the proportions of the normal girl-child's body into animalistic forms. Again, the marriage of the mannerisms of animals and the discourses of girl-childhood materialize in these moving images as a cartoonish, caricatured semblance of a “girl.” Interestingly, while these characters possess many physical similarities to animals like rabbits, hamsters and even “cute” bugs--bulbous heads, enormous, widespread eyes, and squat frames--the plot lines written for them are full of adventurous achievement and feature heroic missions, exploration and intelligence as thematic motifs. This discrepancy indicates that the programs' creators (perhaps reflecting broader social tendencies) have progressed beyond stereotypical representations of the animistic girl-child. But only in certain respects. The retention of these animalistic features could be interpreted an intentional tactic used to maintain the characters' identification as “girl-children” even as they perform discourse-altering behavior. The body image of the girl-child

relative to a “cute” aesthetic locks the character into a safely recognizable “girl-child” (by drawing on associations to animal proportions and particular animal mannerisms) while the character’s actions perform the discursive “risks.” The explosive popularity of these fictitious heroines completes the process by which the girl-child’s body is simultaneously erased and reinvented in an external, fantastical form that reproduces the central tenets of the discourse of girl-childhood through a strong visual association to passive, gentle and physically “cute” animals. Stuffed animals also represent a “cute aesthetic, albeit in a more abstract physical format that projects a different relationship between object and owner. The stuffed animal as a body image does the work of the human-body cartoons, but moves in a different direction: instead of transforming the human figure, they take animals (typically species already considered “cute” in real life) and alter their figures to appear even more sweet, gentle, passive, affectionate and soft. Even less-than-cuddly creatures can be transformed into sweet and lovable “pets” when redesigned as a stuffed animal. Webkinz, for example, sells a stuffed iguana which is refashioned with soft “fur”, smiling features and a fattened body. Stuffed animals have been owned and loved by boys and girl-children alike for generations; what is different now is that their phenomenally popular reinvention into interactive, online “live” animals has created a new, intense relationship between girl-children and their stuffed toys. The target market for these online, “live” animal products (namely Webkinz and Beanie Babies, but they include a host of other lesser-known internet and phone applications) is almost exclusively girl-children (Cook & Kaiser, 2004). The stuffed animals retain all of the trademark elements of “cuteness” in their physical make-up but present an additional relationship in which the girl-child cares for the animal in an online game. It is the creation of this interactive relationship between girl-child and

stuffed animal that appears to gender the toy as feminine. The online Webkinz site, for example, provides the girl-child with a multitude of games and activities ranging from the predictable, such as feeding, playing and caring for the animal's health, to more involved activities, such as designing a house, purchasing pet-friendly furniture, accessories and clothing, and participating in animal fashion shows. The relationship between the owner and the pet is transformed into one of diligent nurturance (the animal can “expire” if left uncared for, the equivalent of dying) and again reproduces the characteristics of girl-childhood, albeit from a slightly different angle: the body of the animal becomes the receptacle by which the girl-child owner practices a motherly gentility, dutiful watchfulness, and a glamorous stylization through purchasing items for her pet. She becomes the concerned caregiver *to a body other than her own* and thus focuses her energies on manipulating and altering the physical conditions of a “cute” animal that returns her attention by mirroring back sweetness and gentility to legitimate her efforts. She fusses over the length and shine of the animal's fur, the color and decorations of its collar, the ruffled petticoats, jewelry, and heeled shoes available for purchase to dress the animal. The materiality of the girl-child's body is once again erased and made invisible in the redirection of her efforts towards an external body. The girl is, in effect, channeling her desire to manipulate a body into an alternative being that provides her the satisfaction of bodily alteration and decoration while denying her the opportunity to turn this focus inward. Thus, “cuteness” within girl-childhood works to erase and reconstitute the body of the girl-child to conform to the requirements of the discourse of girl-childhood, and in doing so, reproduces this discourse by limiting girl-children's access to and knowledge about their own bodies in place of a manufactured, external “ideal.”

This popular culture phenomenon in girl-childhood is exemplified by Madison's

continued desire for “cute” material items and her pleasure in watching several television programs with these types of female heroines. Thus Madison's current interest in Webkinz acts in opposition to her increasing interest in her own *human* body-image-as-text through clothing, hair, and makeup; however, she watched Dora the Explorer for a few years before moving away from cartoons directed specifically at girl-children (she still watches seemingly gender-neutral cartoons like “SpongeBob SquarePants”). The participant's engagement with Webkinz covered a broad commercial, cultural and material range; she interacted with the animated version online, the stuffed animal in person, and with Webkinz products in a store at the mall. The following excerpt highlights how the displacement of the materiality of the girl-child's body and its reconstitution as the fantastical “cute” body of digital animals and cartoons is manifested in Madison's relationship to Webkinz. The discussion features the participant “dressing” her Webkinz (in digital form) in the animal clothing available for sale on a shopping application within the Webkinz website. Madison projected the values onto the items available for sale in relation to the body image of her Webkinz doll and she rejected, accepted and negotiated what was acceptable for her dog versus what was to be avoided.

Allison: How much (Webkinz) money do you have right now?

Madison: Ummm, I only have like forty-five, cuz' I really want to keep her alive, so I don't care about the money, I care about her...so I don't care, I will spend everything on my boy. It's a boy...(She then clicks to a different page). I'm going to buy her...him...some clothes.

Allison: Ok, sounds good.

Madison: They have some really cool clothes! (She now has brought the page open that sells various clothes for the animals). Look at this (She drags mouse over an item of clothing for sale). You can buy that too, it's kind of cute. I'm not going to buy anything but I can show you what they cost. So I would buy this, and this.  
(We look at a few of the clothing items for sale).

Allison: So what would you get your Webkinz doll?

Madison: Mmm...ohhh look, tuxedos, they even have tuxedos. I'd get him that, and see, but look how expensive it is! But this place here is where people shop the most at...see here, here and here (She moves mouse over items, and a percentage pops up ranking the clothing or accessory item's popularity).

See and I saw this here (referring to a big pink metal chain, similar to a dog collar) and I was like I'm going to buy that for him, and then I was like, no! No! No! He's not going to be one of those hip hop guys!

Madison: I like this hat back here (She moves mouse backwards) and I like this one (She moves mouse again). And I especially like this one.

Allison: So you put an outfit together?

Madison: Yah, yah that's what you do. Then there's stuff back here. Oh and then the new stuff in the front. Oh that's a cute beanie (hat) there. Reminds me of Beanie Babies!

On another occasion, the participant decided to show me an application on her mother's iPhone which allowed her to dress a young girl in particular clothing styles and then walk them down a digital runway. The application was a game in which outfits “purchased” with game tokens at the application's “store” were then judged by the game itself on their style. Winners were awarded tokens that allowed the player to spend even more money. Players could choose a “girl” to represent themselves in the game; this girl featured all of the “cute” physical attributes discussed earlier and came in a variety of skin, eye and hair colors. Aside from the bodies providing a clear indication of this application's status as a “kid's game,” the voice prompts and phrases throughout the game were quite simplistic. The application focused solely on dressing the girl in particular clothing (unlike Webkinz, which offered multiple activities to complete with the online “pet”). Madison and I spent several minutes experimenting with this application:

Madison: So can I show you this other thing I play on my mom's phone, it's pretty awesome cuz'

you can play dress up with a girl who looks like you and win money!

Allison: Sure, let's see it!

(Madison runs into her mother's room to retrieve the phone and comes back with the application opened on the screen.)

Madison: So it works like, so you go on and you can pick out outfits from this store here (She taps the keypad to open up the "store" screen). And they have lots of cute stuff to choose from!

Allison: How do you play it?

Madison: Well you pick clothes from the store here and put together outfits and then you walk em' down a runway and if you get picked as the winner you get money to buy more clothes!

Allison: So what clothes do you like to pick out?

Madison: Um..they have new stuff coming in all the time, so you can go back to the application and there'll be new clothes, so then you wanna spend your money on em' to see if you can win cuz they're really styling!

Allison: Are there any items you always pick over and over again?

Madison: Yah, high heels and boots, and ...short skirts, all the time, with a little beanie hat on her body so she looks hot coming down the runway.

Allison: Do you play it a lot?

Madison: Um, yahhh...when my mom gives me her phone I can!

Allison: What do you play more of, this or Webkinz?

Madison: Well...I dunno...maybe the Webkinz because it's a bigger screen and there's more features but this is fun if like, I'm in the car waiting for my brother or there's just nothing to do. But I still do it whenever.

Allison: Can you do her makeup and hair too, or is it just clothing?

Madison: Well like not like in a salon or anything, but when you log on every time if you wanna change her hair style you can do it each time by just clicking on all of the hairstyles there... Here lemme show you (She pulls up a screen on the phone that has several hair styles to choose from).

Allison: Oh wow, there are a ton! What about makeup?

Madison: Um, no...well because the makeup's already sort of on her...but she's not really wearing a lot. It's more about the clothes and hair.

While Madison is no longer fully a girl-child, this dialogue nonetheless reflects the bodily displacement phenomenon in marketing venues that cater to girl-childhood. I argue that this body displacement experienced by girls in girl-childhood (and its continuation into tween-hood) may be causal to the tween's eventual identification with identity work through female body image. This occurs because popular culture sites such as these create the body image as an important factor in negotiating identity by both including online features that prompt girls to adorn and manipulate an external body surface and promoting a particular type of body as ideal. Thus, the girl-child is practicing how to create a specific body image that is based both on the “natural” anatomy of these animals (they come with “cute” physical features on them: androgynous bodies, doe eyes and bulbous heads) and on the knowledge of how to stylize a body image on them that appears aspirational. The Webkinz site visited by Madison featured a variety of “fashion conscious” choices for dressing this otherwise childish creature. This imposition of gendered body image on the androgynous, cute body directly reflects the process Madison was gradually acquiring: how to create a particular body image on her otherwise “girl-childish” body. From this perspective, programs like Webkinz and the iPhone application offer a girl practice in how to produce a body image on a body whose symbolic meaning--cuteness, innocence and naivete--is quite similar to her own body's meanings. In other words, *she is learning how to be a tween on a body other than her own*. Thus, when her focus on body image begins to turn inward this mechanism of cuteness remains salient to her emergent understandings of her own body as a

new locus for identity work.

This is not meant to suggest, however, that cuteness (from this body-focused perspective) is directly or solely responsible for the gradual refocusing on a girl's own body which characterizes tweenhood. None of cute's constituent elements are strong enough on their own to prompt this change from external body to one's own body, from invisibility to body surface materiality. Cuteness works in conjunction *with* the body images of tween popular culture, with tween consumer culture, with the androgyny of the girl-child's body and the imposed gender-coding of her body surface to usher in this transition. The role of cuteness plays two parts. First, it facilitates an "erasure" of the girl-child's body while *simultaneously* creating the body as an important symbolic locus for identity work. Second, it displaces this work onto an external form to keep this body-focus safely away from the actual girl-child's body. This pattern is a derivative of the erasure of the girl-child's body through imposed gender-coding while maintaining an asexuality through her androgynous figure. Cuteness thus works as a tutorial for body manipulation. It is when the aspirational body image of popular culture interacts with these facets of girl-childhood that the transition can occur. The girl-child has been practicing body-manipulation to create a body image on an external being but has not yet experienced this (nor had the capacity to initiate this experience) on her own body. In popular culture, she is presented with a new form of body-image manipulation that utilizes her own body and is also a natural extension of the importance of body surface in girl-childhood and the creation of a "cute" body image.

As described earlier, it is an easy and attractive transition. The girl-child might go on

relying on an aesthetic of cute to modify body surface and retain the invisibility of her bodily materiality. In doing so, she “rejects” the offer made by popular culture to experiment with a new body surface (her own). However, I believe that many girl-children like Madison may simply be tired of this erasure of their own bodies and the constant reliance on an external body to experiment with body image. Madison certainly demonstrated this desire to move away from erasure to create her body as a “presence” with specific meanings. She still enjoyed creating body image(s) on her Webkinz dolls, but this also gave her freedom to re-create her own body to an unprecedented degree. With this newfound freedom, Madison may experience working with the body image of her Webkinz as a pleasurable extension of her own body manipulations, but is no longer the only means by which she can do so. She appears to feel somewhat satisfied (at least for the moment) with her ability to take up an aspirational discourse. In conclusion, she cannot initiate this transition without these components working together.

### **Chapter III.**

#### **The Aspirational “Discourse of Pretty”**

### **The Aspirational “Discourse of Pretty”**

This section describes the fundamental components of the aspirational discourse in which Madison participates. This discourse is the “end result” of all the forces--body image in tween popular culture, tween consumerism and the body image of girl-childhood--discussed previously: it is the culmination of these forces that work together to produce the “discourse of pretty” as a logical, viable and attractive option for the participant (and perhaps tweens more generally) as they increasingly negotiate identity through body image. Most of the characteristics examined are universal to the discourse; however each individual “converses” in a unique way within the larger discourse and Madison's interpretations of this body of beliefs is her own. The aspirational discourse of “pretty” is characterized by a dominant, conventional and western body image gendered as feminine and applied to the female body. It involves a high degree of bodily manipulation and is comprised of aesthetic qualities established as heterosexual in western culture. The physical manipulations required in this discourse dictate a beauty and exercise regimen that alter the tween girl's body through processes of “enhancement” that elevate its attributes to “ideal” from a formerly “average” status. The discourse is a constellation of directives concerning the surface appearance, proportions and shape of the pre-teen girl's body. Bordo (2004) posits that:

Through the pursuit of an ever-changing, homogenizing, elusive ideal of femininity--a pursuit without end, requiring that girls constantly attend to minute and often whimsical changes in fashion-- female bodies become docile bodies...Through the exacting and normalizing disciplines of diet, make-up and dress--central organizing principles of time

and space in the daily lives of many girls--they are rendered increasingly focused on self-modification (p. 166).

This beauty normalization consists of a set of physical traits that can be broken down into separate pieces and that coalesce into an over-determined, ideal “package” of feminine attractiveness. As Bordo cautions, “The delicate, meticulously styled and painted female form, despite the game resistance of racial and ethnic difference, has become the western norm of women today” (2004, p. 171).

But this decorous fragility is only the tip of the iceberg, for illusory perfection itself requires interpretation. Bordo continues: “It is meaning that makes the sale. So, too, it is meaning that makes the body admirable...The ideal of beauty, then and physical work required in its maintenance that has become inseparable from it offer the illusion of meeting, through the body, the demands of the contemporary ideology of femininity” (2004, p. 171). The emphasis in tween-hood on achieving “pretty” is done primarily by emphasizing what is immediately and easily changeable about the body. For example, rarely do tween magazines or tween body care advertising feature plastic surgery to produce a more petite nose, higher cheekbones, a chiseled jaw line, or fuller lips. These are manipulations directed at women who have the financial resources to pay for such alterations (an impossibility for most tweens). In tween-hood, on the other hand, there seems to be an emphasis on “playing up one's natural beauty” by using external “remedies” to alter what one has been given “naturally,” rather than changing the anatomy of body parts themselves. These directives might extend from the tween's close association to girl-childhood, which as argued earlier, erases the materiality of the body. Such invisibility sits in

close proximity to tween-hood and thus an extreme modification to the body (like plastic surgery) might be viewed as a serious invasion of the “natural” bodily state of the near-girl-child tween. The “discourse of pretty” in tween-hood focuses on surface manipulation of given attributes by creating optical illusions that gently promote improvement. The objective of the discourse of pretty within tween-hood is to suggest a *natural* prettiness by making the physical features one already has *appear* better without changing the features themselves. Hence “highlighting” hair, “bringing out the tones” in skin color and “focusing the eye” on eye color through shadow application become catch phrases within the discourse of pretty. It requires a process of constant enhancement through illusion--making eyes *appear* wider by arranging shadow tones correctly, making lips *seem* fuller by applying gloss a certain way. Such language is everyday usage in tween culture's “discourse of pretty.” Its demands are particular and rigid: hair texture should be thick, long, full bodied and styled, while hair color usually aims for lightening (getting “highlights” typically indicates adding blonde to lighten a brown or black shade). Skin should be even and clear and the production of a “pretty” face demands specific makeup application: rosy cheeks through blush, wide, cat-like eyes using shadow, mascara and eye liner (this doe-eyed “cat” look may be a carry-over from the “cute” heroines of girl-childhood), and full lips through lip pencils, lipstick and gloss. The discourse's ideal tween physique is long and slender, and clothing should have all of the typically feminine attributes of girl-childhood-ruffles, softness and detail with one critical difference: blending “older” trends into the cut and arrangement of the fabric itself. For example although emblematic of girl-childhood, the color pink remains a staple of tween clothing, while other colors that add a subtle sexuality through their alternative connotations (“sexy” red or mysterious black, for example) are

increasingly prized. Lastly, adornments such as jewelry and body paint in the form of sparkles, glitter and decorative hair embellishments truly separate this “look” from its girl-child and teen counterparts.

### **“Looking Pretty:” Data Support**

Through seemingly trivial changes, the forces and energies of Madison's body have become accustomed to external regulation, subjection, transformation, and improvement (Bordo, 2004). While she did not express any desire for a slender figure or the exercise regimen characteristic of this discourse, the participant gravitated towards clothing styles that evoked a “pretty” or “sexy” aesthetic, makeup application, hair alterations and a general adornment of her body to produce a self-beautification according to the discourse's western standards. She repeatedly demonstrated a desire to alter certain parts of her body--those identified as particularly effective in evoking the discourse of pretty--and often focused on these body parts as separate pieces. The following discussions highlight the physical features Madison focuses on in transforming her body image from girl-childhood to “aspirational pretty.” Specifically, it illustrates the participant's knowledge of facial and hairstyle manipulations. The conversation centered around how she prepared her appearances for school each day.

Allison: So how do you usually get ready for school? Like what do you do to yourself if anything?

Madison: Um, well lots of stuff but it depends on time.

Allison: Like what?

Madison: Well, like hair and some makeup usually, and picking out the clothes.

Allison: How often do you do this?

Madison: I try for all the time but there isn't always time. Sometimes I take a brush and lip gloss to school just in case...Can you show me some makeup tricks?

Allison: Sure, what would you like to know?

(Instead of answering, Madison walks over to her mirror and begins examining her hair).

Madison: Oooo, my hair is all frizzy! (Looks at her hair in the mirror). I want it smooth-ish usually, but I don't always have time cuz' I sleep in before school starts!

Allison: Well what do you know about makeup? Let me ask you that.

Madison: It makes you look pretty.

Allison: Is this all the makeup you own?

Madison: Yep...I've got cover up, it covers up pimples and stuff....and...cuz when I got to school my skin it gets all messed up and I get spots on my face.

Allison: Do you carry this with you to school?

Madison: No, it stays at home.

Allison: Ok, so you just keep it here with you?

Madison: Yes.

Allison: How about mascara?

Madison: I wear it a lot.

Allison: Where do you wear it?

Madison: I wear that to school a lot. I'm gonna put some on. Yes!

(She picks it up and goes over to the mirror to begin applying the mascara).

Allison: Does your mom have makeup you would wear?

Madison: Oh yah, there's lots of stuff I've tried to use before.

Allison: Are there clothes you tend to wear more often than others?

Madison: Um, yah...but the good stuff, like the pretty stuff...I can't wear everyday cuz' momma says it has to stay nice.

During another session, the participant and I were flipping through a series of her school pictures collected in an album by her mother. I asked Madison to describe what preparations (if any) she had taken for the pictures:

Allison: So did you think about how you would look in the photographs? Did you do any prep work?

Madison: Oh yah, so in this one (She points to her first grade school photograph) I tried really, really hard and momma helped me, but then she got kinda upset cuz I was trying *to hard!*

Allison: What do you mean by "too hard?"

Madison: Um, well the day of the photograph I knew exactly how I wanted to look, and I told momma about it and she said it was ok, but then the morning of the picture-taking thing, I...decided to switch it up! She got so mad!

Allison: What did you do to change your look?

Madison: I wanted my hair to look this way, like you put gel in it so it stays off to the side, but you have to curl it first, then use the gel 'cuz I did it like...like backwards, and then when I went to curl it my hair was all sticky!

Allison: How come you did it backwards?

Madison: Mmmm. I didn't know how to do it, I just saw this girl do it and I really wanted it, so I guess I didn't think too hard about that one! So momma had to wash it all out and I was late for school!

Allison: What about your clothes?

Madison: Well I think I liked what I wore that day, but really it was more about the hair...Oh and my makeup! I stole some eye shadow from her and put it on for the picture but it looked all bad 'cuz, 'cuz...I didn't have a lot of practice with it yet. And I tried out some blush and that looked better but she was all like *you don't need it!* So I had to wash it off, and the hair and *Oh my God!* She was so mad!

Allison: So how did you wind up feeling when your picture was taken?

Madison: I still looked ok, actually a lot better than before during the morning! But I posed kind of sassy for that one, 'cuz the makeup and hair didn't work out! I still looked *good!*

Allison: What do you mean by “posing sassy?”

Madison: I always pose for the camera.

Allison: Can you explain that more? What do you mean by that?

Madison: Well I always try to look, like, a girly girl, you know? Like I know exactly what to do for pictures especially like the ones we're taking.

Allison: What do you do?

Madison: I go like this (She tilts her head, turns her body, lowers her eye lids and provides a half-smile). It's just much better, sassier than going like this (She looks straight at me and frowns her lips downward).

Allison: How about your school pictures now? Did you change your routine at all?

Madison: Oh yah, now it's all better. I do the makeup and the hair myself but I'm much better at both. It's like I can use em' everyday, so when the picture thing comes around I don't have to try so hard, cuz I'm used to it.

These conversations demonstrate that the participant has identified what “pieces” correctly coalesce to produce a particular image and understands how to appropriate the “discourse of pretty” onto her own body.

In addition to these elements, skin plays a particularly highly charged symbolic role in the tween version of the “discourse of pretty.” Although skin's physical attributes such as smoothness, softness and tone are important, the body parts chosen to be revealed or covered, as well as how these parts themselves are arranged, all denote a “prettiness” that can imbue a

*controlled degree of sex appeal.* For the tween specifically, the desired end product of this identity work is to exhibit a self-initiated state of “not-child” through a series of body surface symbols that act in opposition to the innocence, naiveté and “sweetness” of girl-childhood. “Pretty” exists in girl-childhood, but its oppositional nature in tween-hood is dependent on the addition of a subtle sexuality that works to aspire *away* from girl-childhood. Grosz (1994) describes the function of sexuality-as-aspiration as the following:

The subject is...open to and particularly productive of the intimate exploration of and attachment to a sexual object...which becomes...a projection of possible futures onto the structure of the lived present. The body becomes the locus by which aspiration becomes sexuality and sexuality reflects aspiration as inseparable units. (p. 109)

Within tween culture, the coverage and revelation of skin in certain sexually-charged areas (namely the breasts, buttocks and groin,) regulate the sexuality evoked on the body surface. Bikinis in tween-hood are interesting because they reveal a great deal of skin on an otherwise androgynous body. This exposure actually implicitly draws attention *back to* the covered areas-- which are also the sexually charged areas (cups covering the breast area and panties over the buttocks and groin). Yet physiologically androgynous tweens like Madison have neither developed breasts, widening hips, a full bottom or pubic hair. Thus, there is a focus on sexually charged areas that in fact lack a sexual charge simply because the coverage of the skin where these features *should be* indicates that there is something that needs to be covered in the first place. This positioning, of course, is meant to intentionally invert the discourses of girl-childhood, which dictates that androgyny negates the need to cover up because no sexually-

charged, physical signifiers are present. In the following quote, for example, Madison eagerly embraced bikinis but mentioned feeling “weird” wearing them around her brother and his friends. While this hesitation was surely due in part to her brother's identity as a blood relative, her restraint around a member of the opposite sex also reveals she was aware of the sexually-charged nature of bikinis. The participant also mentioned a “secret bikini shot” that she rarely showed to anyone and that she declined to discuss further. While I was unable to talk about this photograph with her, I decided to press for more information about how she conceptualized bikinis relative to her own body:

Allison: How often do you wear bikinis?

Madison: Nat has never seen me in a bikini.

Allison: Why not?

Madison: It makes me feel *weird*, and...(Her voice trails off).

Allison: Do you have more bikinis or bathing suits like that?

Madison: Hmm...bikinis? Ummm, thousands-if I counted all my bathing suits, I have more bathing suits, no actually bikinis, than clothes.

Allison: Wow! Are they up here in State College?

Madison: Hmm not the bathing suits, but the bikinis--I do have a few, I can show you them. There are some, lots, um...in Florida, but I took some up here when I visited my grandfather. (She opens her closet, brings out three sets of bikinis she owns and holds one bikini up for me to see). Here. This one is just ok. (She then holds up a different bikini). This one...we can take shots in them. Because I like them!

Allison: Why do you like this one?

Madison: I like it because it fits my skin, black and kind of brownish, because my skin is kind of brownish...and I like it because of the ties, it's cool on the side with the ties, and it's got the black and hot pink, my favorite colors.

Allison: How do bikinis make you feel when you wear them or see them?

Madison: Um...kind of...sassy.

Allison: What do you mean by “sassy?”

Madison: Well not sexy, really...just like, pretty, but like all the boys would look at you ‘cuz you show a lot! But not in a weird way, just like you wanna get some boys attracted.

Allison: What about one-piece bathing suits? Did you ever own those?

Madison: Yah, when I was like two or three...but I don't really remember them because I've been in bikinis like forever.

In conclusion, the tween bikini creates a variation on prettiness that is specific to tween-hood in its aspirational “sexiness” because it *acts* as though certain areas of the body need to be covered.

Creating parameters around one's sexuality also maintains the tween's body image as “pretty;” likewise, regulating the individual aesthetic elements of one's body surface prevents “pretty” from turning into “slutty.” Prohibiting excessive self-immersion in the discourse prohibits excessive self-display and is important to achieving the perfect physical “pitch.” Bordo (2004) posits that:

Between the media images of self-containment and self-mastery and the reality of constant, everyday stress and anxiety about one's appearance lies the chasm that produces bodies habituated to self-monitoring and self-normalization. Ultimately, the body (besides being evaluated for its success or failure at getting itself in order) is seen as demonstrating correct or incorrect attitudes towards the demands of the normalization itself (p. 180).

Restraint refers back to a broader set of cultural structures within western society that prize bodily restraint of all kinds (sexual pleasure, food intake, weight gain) as demonstrating control over an otherwise “naturally” unruly, unpredictable and unmanageable body (Bordo, 2004). *Acceptably* “pretty” within the discourse of pretty describes an exact combination of bodily manipulations whose end result is a product that titillates male sexual instincts and the imagination while simultaneously exhibiting restraint in order to present oneself as “classy” and “tasteful.” The mixed messages work as a system of checks and balances. Sexual suggestion is checked by taste and class; taste and class are stretched the tiniest bit to evoke male admiration and desire. The body image of the discourse of pretty is one bounded by all manner of cautions. The sexuality of the discourse of pretty is tightly monitored and controlled by balancing the type and degree of self-initiated body surface manipulations. The participant displayed this self-regulation consistently throughout the study and often contradicted herself in her eager desire to apply a standard element of “sexiness” to her own body (such as high heels or a bra) only to later condemn these clothing styles as unacceptable for girls her age. Her condemnations were characterized by phrases like “inappropriate,” “weird,” and “sexy,” clearly identifying “sexiness” as a negative attribute. For the participant, the practice of the “discourse of pretty” involved a constant mediation between excess and insufficient body surface manipulation to maintain the meaning of “sexy” body image in contemporary western culture; this was particularly obvious in her eschewing of any pop stars that display an “extreme,” “weird,” or “over the top” body image. The following conversation, for example, occurred while we were walking through the mall and illustrates the participant's desire for a tempered sexuality:

Madison: *I wanna buy a bra but momma won't let me!* (She walks by a rack of bras).

Allison: You want to buy a bra?

Madison: My friend has a bra and she's like six.

Allison: Does she have the chest that goes with the bra?

Madison: Nope.

Allison: So she just has a bra for the sake of having a bra?

Madison: Yah. Hey these might fit me... (She examines a rack of training bras that are made for very flat-chested girls).

Allison: Why do you want a bra?

Madison: Mmmm...I dunno...I just do. They're cool.

In this instance, the participant's desire for a bra perhaps indicates that she wants to “wear” the sexiness implied by a bra without needing the accompanying physical attributes. Madison also desired “minor” alterations to her body like fake nails, rounded-toe shoes, “subtle” eye shadow and highlights in her hair. Desiring a bra and desiring fake nails both indicate the participant's desire to manipulate her body surface but they represent different degrees of sexuality and thus different levels of risk. Fake nails are not asexual but contribute to the coalesced body image of “sexy” much less than a bra. In contrast, a bra conveys sexuality by implying puberty. Thus, it presents a greater opportunity for subjectivity (breasts imply puberty, which grants the tween a sense of subjectivity) but contradicts the androgynous reality of the girl-child's body. It is a potential “misstep” more costly than the more sexually neutral nails and hair highlights. In conclusion, the congruence between the regulations the participant projected onto images she saw and what she practiced on her own body suggests that this aspect of the discourse of pretty is

highly generalizable across many contexts in Madison's life.

These quotes also demonstrate that Madison's surveillance was not limited to girls who were her age; in fact, the participant's definition of “slutty” changed from age group to age group. She expressed disdain for the theatrical makeup and hair styling of Lady Gaga, a twenty five year old pop star, but I first noticed this attitude during the first two sessions as we looked at photographs of tween girls taken by professional artists. I asked the participant to respond freely to the photographs I provided by giving her first impression of each picture. In the first two quotes below, Madison objected to the girl in the photograph for suggesting sexuality by removing her clothes and posing provocatively (the girl's pose, which involved her peeling back her shirt and pants, suggested that she was removing her clothes). Her critique of these girls was based on a two step process in which she first identified with them based on their apparent age, and from this identification compared and contrasted how she negotiated the discourse of pretty against their (and the photographers') use of the discourse. In other words, she rejected their sexuality not only for its inappropriateness on the meta-narrative level, but because it was what she *personally* disliked for her own body image. The conversations were as follows:

(We begin looking at pictures by Helen Van Meene:)

Allison: What do you think of the girls in the pictures?

Madison: Some of these pictures look inappropriate!

Allison: Why do you think they look inappropriate?

Madison: ‘Cuz they are kind of all naked, and not wearing much.

Allison: Do you think she looks like she’s showing too much skin for a girl her age?

Madison: Yah, definitely. That thing reminds me of a bra...She looks weird..and the way she's posed makes her look like she's *taking off her clothes!*

Allison: Why do you say that?

Madison: Because her hands are up here (demonstrates by putting her hands over her head).

Allison: How about her face?

Madison: Well, um...her face looks like she's acting like the camera isn't there, like she doesn't notice or something. She's looking away from the camera.

(A few minutes later, we came upon two different pictures. I ask Madison to compare the two pictures, one more provocative than the other):

Madison: I would do this but I would definitely not do this! I wonder why the mom allowed this, my mom would *never allow this!*

A few minutes later, she reacted similarly to another photograph of a girl her age who posed in underwear and a bra and was lying on a bed:

Allison: What's your immediate impression of this girl?

Madison: She's sexy and a little inappropriate!

Allison: Why?

Madison: I would pose like her and her...but not wear like so much stuff...like she acts like whatever, like too sassy, not just ya know...Cuz' like look at how they're posing...like I would pose like that but I wouldn't be frowning. Ok, and she has heart shaped glasses which are unusual.

Allison: What about what she's wearing?

Madison: Well, with this one I don't know what she's wearing cuz' it doesn't look like she's wearing *anything!* Then this one seems like it was taken at nighttime and it kind of looks like she's just getting ready for bed. And looking at her she's putting on her pajamas. And this girl, she just wants to look good for the camera because she knows she's going to get looked at so she just wants to look good and sexy...and same with her...Oh my God, look, see, *she has a*

*cigarette!* (With mild alarm). I had one and when you puff it fake smoke comes out, and my mom freaked out. My dad got me it as a prank.

In the picture of Lady Gaga, however, her reaction used different descriptors and focused on different aspects of the photograph. The photograph is undoubtedly provocative: (although fully clothed, Lady Gaga's legs are spread in front of the camera and she is wearing a tight leotard, a push-up bra, an extremely theatrical hairstyle and makeup), but Madison chose to focus on the “weirdness” of the singer's makeup and hair styles, completely ignoring her legs, glaring, aggressive facial expression and tight, revealing leotard.

Madison: (Sees the picture of the singer): Lady Gaga...is that Lady Gaga?

Allison: Yes, I'm pretty sure it is.

Madison: Some people say she's *crazzzzyy*....I like this magazine!

Allison: Yes.

Madison: But *ew!* That's *too much* makeup going on! This one's okay (She points to another picture of Lady Gaga dressed casually, with minimal makeup) but this one (She points back to the picture of Lady Gaga with an exaggerated hairstyle and lots of makeup) is just *ugh!*

There is a clear difference between what the participant identifies as unacceptable in the photographs of girls her age and the physically suggestive posing of a grown woman. Perhaps the participant assumed that an excessive degree of sexuality is likely for a pop star in Lady Gaga's age category. Madison seemed to equate sexuality with a certain life stage, the puberty-subjectivity paradigm. The participant also displayed a blatant admonishment of “sexy” during

our walk through the mall:

Allison: Do you want to go in here? (I reference the teen clothier “Charlotte Russe” as we walk by.)

Madison: Nahhhh it seems too sassy kind of...Like too sexy...like *look at it! Look at that skirt!*  
It's all like black...It's *too much for me!*

Like her reaction to the professional photographs of tween girls, the participant compared herself to the discourses she deciphers in these images. She first recognized it as a transgression, then defined it as such by identifying it against her own body: “It's too much for me!” In this case, despite the existence of the discourse of pretty outside the rigid parameters of age and Madison's constant demonstration of this fluidity, the fact that Madison perhaps sensed she was not yet “ready” for the older, sexually functional discourse actually supports the theory of age-related, progressively complicated discourses to be valid. She might also be afraid to confront the blatant sexual suggestiveness of an older woman because it is *real* (Lady Gaga's body *can* do certain things) and this is frightening at her age at some level. She is not entirely “ready” for the mandates of the discourse in full.

Makeup's role as the mediating factor between acceptability and excess was also evident in Madison's application of cosmetics to her own face. The following conversation involved her applying her mother's eye shadow from a kit that contained six different shades:

(She opens up the eye shadow kit and begins explaining each eye shadow).

Madison: So this purple one, this was the one momma used when I dressed up as Cleopatra on

Halloween, but, um, she put on a lot and it was really dark! But it looked okay cuz' it was part of the costume. But see, this one (She holds up the shadow palette and points to a light gold shadow strip.) This one doesn't really show, it just makes it really sparkly and has a really little light color to it. Here, I'll show you (she puts a bit on in the mirror.) It kind of just gives it a little sparkle. (She turns to me after applying the eyeshadow to show me what it looks like.)

Allison: Oh, it looks very nice.

Madison: Yah, but I really like yours better. (She is referring to the subtle gold eye shadow I'm wearing) cuz' it has a goldish color to it...and it sparkles just enough, like just right.

Allison: What do you think of some of the other ones? (I'm referring to makeup shades other than the “subtle” one she liked).

Madison: Well... I think the darker ones...they make me look a little too old.

Allison: And I don't really think you need the cover up, so the mascara will probably do.

Madison: My grandma says I do it like a pro, but I don't believe her. And I don't do it down here (She is referring to her bottom lashes). But I also don't know how.

In this conversation, the participant separated normality and abnormality by the obviousness of the dark shade and the subtlety of the light shade. “Obviousness” for her became the quality of facial manipulations to be avoided, much akin to Lady Gaga's dramatized makeup application. She regulated “prettiness” by controlling the amount of effort it appears to have taken to achieve a given “look” through makeup and thus the type of attention desired from the opposite sex.

Madison's evaluations of physical excess in the male bodies she observed in popular culture also showed disparities. For example, while her system of checks and balances concerning female body image was prevalent throughout her observations no such regulations of “excess” existed in her response to male bodies. When referencing the male body she limited her

appraisals to two categories: bodies and character traits that were “not enough,” and bodies and character traits that were “just right.” This tendency was exemplified in our conversations concerning “Twilight,” a book-turned-movie series and national popular culture phenomenon that has captured the attention of female tween and teen fans for the past five years. The plot line of “Twilight” concerns a love triangle between Bella, a teen girl, Edward, her vampire boyfriend, and Jacob, her male friend who moonlights as a werewolf. Edward and Jacob vie for Bella’s affection throughout the four-part series using supernatural strength and powers against each other that are often displayed in action-packed fight scenes and tender rescues of Bella. This idealized masculinity presented by the two lead male characters was reflected in Madison’s recounts of their physical features and behaviors. For example, Jacob's muscle size and strength were never criticized by the participant for being “too large” or “looking too strong.” Similarly, nor were his behaviors criticized as “trying too hard to save the girl.” On the other hand, her description of Edward reflected the weaknesses possible in the male physical frame and skin coloring and conversely reinforced the masculine ideal of a “bronzed glow” (Bordo, 2004). However, her perspectives repeatedly revealed an unwillingness to judge excessiveness in the ideal traits in the male figure. In conclusion, the participant desired particular elements of the discourse of girl-childhood yet simultaneously desired other equally specific elements of an aspirational discourse and she selected only the elements of a discourse that she could identify with at this point along her transition between discourses. This may indicate that the tween can select from a range of individual body alterations, choosing what she wants to exhibit on her body at a given time and the type of signifiers themselves. This is possible because particular signifiers connote different degrees of sexuality ranging from mild bodily alteration to a

replication of the physical symbols of puberty (which indicate the presence of an internal, physical sexuality at work). Madison selected the tenets of the discourse that worked for her, rather than embracing all of its facets because certain elements within it were inapplicable to her present state as “subject” in this moment within her transition.

### **“Looking Pretty” by Reading the Male Body: Data Support**

Another facet of the discourse of pretty is the way in which the qualities of the female body are normalized in opposition to the equally idealized features of the male body. Bordo observes that “Muscles have chiefly symbolized and continue to symbolize masculine power as physical strength, frequently operating as a means of coding the 'naturalness' of sexual difference” (2004, p. 193). The more opposite the physical attributes of male and female bodies, the more the requirements of the discourse of pretty on the female body are idealized. The complete “look” of ideal masculinity results from a compilation of specific physical attributes on the male body surface, namely sculpted muscles, a fit and tight body profile and tanned skin. These anatomical features are accompanied by an attitude of confidence, a sexual prowess and a brawny strength. The extreme confidence and physical strength in this ideal male physique produce passivity, slenderness, fragility and prettiness as the ideal opposite body image in the female sex. This open and aggressive display of male sexuality furthermore creates sexual restraint and control as the opposite ideal of femininity (as I noted earlier, the discourse of pretty in its idyllic form is grounded in repression of excess because excess is identified with “sluttiness”). Madison's desire for this type of male body was a prominent motif running through her observations of male bodies in popular culture and across her comments about the

boys she knew personally. Her reliance on a male body image ideal to define what constituted an *acceptable* male body seemingly reflects her acquiescence in the dominant feminine ideal. The following conversation began as we looked at pictures from the movie “Twilight” featured in her “J-14” magazine and evolved into a tangential discussion about the main male characters' physical features:

Allison: Does your mom usually let you get magazines like this?

Madison: Um, yah, I get em' every month so I'm used to it.

Allison: How long have you subscribed to it?

Madison: Not very long...like some months, like six months, not like years and years.

Allison: Do you get other magazines besides this one?

Madison: I get this one and other ones, but I like this one...is this New Moon?  
*Oh* I like Twilight!

Allison: Yes.

Madison: The only thing I'm going to tell you is that he's cute and he has *lots of muscles!* (She is referring to Jacob, the main character). He takes off his shirt in almost every scene so you can see em...When he takes off his shirt to wipe off the blood, his muscles are like bulging out and everyone was like, *Oh!* (She makes an exaggerated sighing sound and dramatic facial expression). And then after that everyone was like, Ohhh he's so cute! And then everyone started whispering about him.

Allison: What do you think of Bella, the female character?

Madison: Um...she's really nice. I really like her. But Jacob is still my favorite because he's nice and really cute and stuff and all my friends still like Edward, but I like Jacob.

Allison: Why do you think they like Edward?

Madison: I don't know...he's all kind of pale and weird and stuff, like he hides all the time and doesn't have friends, and Jacob is fun and super hot and so nice to Bella.

During our trip to the mall, the participant made a similar evaluation of Jacob's muscular frame:

Allison: What do you think of him (I point to a picture of Justin Bieber, a male pop singer).

Madison: He's pretty cute...but Jacob has more muscles.

(I then explain how a picture of Jacob in Twilight is been digitally altered to make him look a certain way, and Madison cuts in:)

Madison: He looks like he's got the muscles *a lot*.

Allison: Why do you think he looks like that?

Madison: Well, I think he looks like that because he gets tough a lot...since he's so tough because he's a werewolf and he's used to not smiling. So werewolves don't really smile.

Allison: What about Edward?

Madison: Edward...well he's just kind of out there and his skin is really pale so he thinks how he's a vampire.

During a different session back at the participant's apartment, we turned to a page of "J-14" and a picture of Taylor Lautner of Twilight appears. Madison reacts as follows:

Madison: *Oh* so this is also from the movie because he's riding the motorcycles because it's from the part where she falls off of the motorcycle and he takes his whole shirt off to wipe the blood off her. And you can *just* by *looking* at him.

Allison: What can you tell?

Madison: You can tell that he's strong just by looking at him...like the way he's formed...and he looks much, much stronger than that in the movie....like *way stronger!*

These excerpts demonstrate how the participant identified the most common physical features comprising the dominant male body image and also rated them as superior. She then created a hierarchy of male bodies based on the discrepancies she identified in Edward's and Jacob's bodies. Robert Pattinson (the male actor playing Edward) is adored by millions of female fans but in weighting the fictional *characters* against each other, Madison judged Jacob's idyllic body more appropriate for carrying out the heroic tasks required of the leading male protagonist. Jacob was framed as attractive because he is “fun and super hot and is so nice to Bella,” while Edward's physical features are less appealing: “He’s all kind of pale and weird and stuff, like he hides all the time and doesn’t have friends.” “Toughness” was another quality she associated with Jacob's muscular, “werewolf” frame. This of course produced passivity as the opposite ideal in the female lead character whom the participant identified as in need of rescue by a strong masculine body. In this way, body image and behavior are interrelated with the ideal body image reflecting desirable personality traits. For instance, the participant made a direct correlation between Edward's body and his behaviors; his paleness and “weirdness” corresponded to his tendency to be antisocial: “He hides all the time and doesn't have friends.” Within the storyline, certain body images connote certain character traits and capabilities (sexual ardor) which dictate a female character with opposite traits. In fact, for Madison only certain types of male bodies were *worthy and able* of producing a feminine ideal as their opposite through such heroic behaviors. Her analysis takes place within the context of the story but the story itself is deeply embedded in popular culture (as I mentioned earlier, Robert Pattinson as an *actor* is a bona fide pop culture sex symbol) and therefore accessible to her everyday body image evaluations.

Beyond *Twilight*, social interactions between the sexes in popular culture often reflect a

similar showy display of physical strength and bravery on the part of the male and a fragile and unstable emotional state on the female's part. Bordo notes that, "A dominant visual theme in teenage magazines involves women hiding in the shadows of men, seeking solace in their arms, willingly contracting the space they occupy" (2004, p. 192). The female body in these depictions acts as the "not man," appearing soft and delicate and acting passively and reactively. *J-14* repeatedly juxtaposed the delicacy of the female figure (in the form of actresses and/or singers) against the muscularity of the current male body-ideal, the female figure displaying meekness in the face of a decisive male spatial occupation. The following conversation supports this complimentary nature of male and female social interactions and occurred as we discussed the contents of *J-14*.

Allison: Have you seen any movies recently or would like to see any movies that are out right now?

Madison: I've seen the Twilights...both of them--one and two--*New Moon* and the other one...the first one.

Allison: Who did you see them with?

Madison: Um...my mom and Joey, we all went together (Brother's name has been changed).

Allison: What did you think of it?

Madison: I loved it! I wasn't scared at all and Jacob is so hot. He has the best body...his chest...is really good, I love it. In every scene he's pulling off his shirt to help Bella and like...in this one scene, where Bella falls down and he's on top of her like, um...he tries to help her by taking his shirt off to wipe the blood off her face, because um...because she fell down and hit her head.

Allison: What does she do while he helps her?

Madison: Well, she's crying and upset and looks a little weirded out...like confused.

Allison: What about the other character...Edward?

Madison: He's...um, he's really nice too, they're both really good. But I love Jacob because he's so cute! And he's a really good friend to Bella, and like, when he rips his shirt off to become a werewolf it's kind of scary but really I'm not scared!

Allison: How well do you know the story?

Madison: Um, not well, I haven't read the books but I love the movies.

In this discussion, Madison identified ideal male behavior towards an ideal female character with physical appearances. In a different conversation and context, she also identified aggressive sexual behavior and rebelliousness as desirable traits in the boys she knew personally. The following discussion occurred during our mall trip as we were walking into a department store.

Allison: Are you all set to go in?

Madison: Yep! (She climbs out of the car and we begin walking towards the mall's entrance doors.) Let's get some boys attracted!

Allison: How would you go about doing that?

Madison: Well, I have to find the cute ones, but momma says they have to be nice too...Or I can go for a bad boy! *I like bad boys!*

Allison: Well yah, really look for the nice part first, the cute part second, even though I know that can be hard to do! So what makes a boy a bad boy?

Madison: Umm, they're sexy, and motorcycles, sometimes, like Taylor Lautner ("Jacob" of *Twilight*) in that one picture...he's *so hot!* Momma doesn't let me use the word "hot," only cute...so I just say the "h" word.

Allison: The "h" word?

Madison: Yah, I call it the "h" word.

In these exchanges, the participant expresses a preference for the ideological opposite of the passive, sexually restrained heteronormative feminine ideal. A “bad boy” represents all of the sexual risk-taking the tween denies herself and is denied to her by social norms. Madison also identified “hotness” with inappropriate sexuality but this inappropriateness was derived from her mother's expectations, not her own. She seemed to suggest that without her mother's rules about the word “hot” she would use the word freely and evidently did so in her mother's absence and in trusted company (me). The participant's use of the words “hot” and “sexy” is also interesting because she used it in reference to someone besides herself; Madison preferred the term “sassy” when speaking of herself. Her participation in the discourse of pretty prevented her from a self-identification with “hotness” because it denotes a sexual suggestiveness on the female body which is outside the discourse. Instead, “hotness” was transferred onto other bodies completely. Following this line, the recipients of this transferral were not females like the participant herself but male sexual icons who are permitted to exude sexual aggression. The heteronormative male ideal that the participant desired acted as a safe “receptacle” for sexuality itself; “he” represents the acceptability of sexuality and thus any sexuality projected onto him (by the participant) seemed safe because it was removed from the immediacy of her own body. Yet in desiring this sexualized, idyllic male body, the participant was also gratified with a vicarious “return” in exchange for her attention, which was the reciprocal production of herself as the feminine ideal of the discourse of pretty. She could view herself as sexually desirable, perhaps, in the meaning implicitly reflected back onto her from her desire for the ideal male physique without the problem of naming herself as such.

The participant's immediate male peers provided a locus for a “less than desirable”

masculinity which re-enforced the idyllicism of the discourse of pretty. I found the degree to which the participant rejected masculinity as a potential component of her own body image and the heated way in which she responded to several masculine material items and popular culture venues unusual. Her rejection of anything “boyish” (rather than masculine traits) was not directed towards the male body image unless it failed to meet the standard exemplified in body images in popular culture. She never referred to boys of her own age or boys she knew personally in body image terms. If she commented on boys' bodies it was typically to observe another girl's reaction to the male body or interactions with the male body. Both evaluations point to the constellation of features constituting the discourse of pretty by referring to *what it is not*, but Madison's identification of “opposite” was different for the two definitions of “maleness.” In admiring the ideal male physique the participant positioned herself as opposite, subject to another, equal ideal. Thus the physical manipulations absent in one discourse were supplied, in mirror image, in the other. However, the oppositional nature of the body images the participant describes here worked as negative attributes: they are “below” the standard of the idyllic discourse of pretty and worked to maintain the idyllicism of the discourse of pretty as “more than” by functioning as “less than.” Evaluation statements about her male peers and brother--boys she knew firsthand—were characterized by a general disgust and capped off by exaggerated humor in her delivery. This repudiation was directed at specific attributes of masculine clothing and hair style (rather than the body underneath). She compartmentalized features of male bodily adornment rather than conceptualizing them as the cohesive, sexualized masculinity of her male pop star idols. The first quote involves a sequence of interactions between Madison, her brother and me which took place in her bedroom. Her tone reflected an

incomprehension of all things “boyish” and an implicit desire to protect herself against a potential appropriation of these qualities. The second quote depicts the participant's theatrical disgust towards the body image of her brother and his friends by focusing on saggy pants. Identifying this dress style as negative reinforces her participation in the discourse of pretty (which would require slim-fitting pants and a slender figure underneath) by naming what it is not.

Madison: I'm going to go get my magazine now.

Allison: Okay.

(Her brother walks in the room and asks a question about his friend for whom he is looking. Madison shoos him out of the room and then leans towards me).

Madison: So it was *really* funny one time with his friend because he wore *Barney underwear* and *Spongebob underwear*! So when he bent over I saw it! Oh and sometimes I like to give my brother a wedgie when he bends over...but it's so gross because boys always wear their pants so low, so when you do it you have to stick your finger down in there and pull way down. I just think it's gross when they wear their pants like that, like all low!

Next, on our car ride to the mall, she suddenly noticed a pack of college-aged boys walking with their hoods up and says:

Madison: I *hate* it when boys where hoods up!

Allison: Why?

Madison: 'Cuz they have all these hoods up, and it's not even cold out...and they walk like looking down at the time.

In yet another instance, we were walking through the mall when the participant elicited the following reaction upon passing a group of pre-teen boys:

Madison: See....that's so *weird*.

Allison: What's weird?

Madison: Those boys...it's just *not normal*! The way they dress can be so stupid....like I hate those, um, those flat hats they wear. My brother wears his hat *backwards* and flat... *ugh, I don't want to be a boy!*

(A minute later, she notices a boy that walks past us).

Madison: That boy was kind of cute because of his hair...I *really* like boys *who have their hair like down to here* (She indicates by holding her hand up to her face) and then they brush it off to the side. (She is referring to a hair cut that is currently very popular with boys, in which the hair is grown down to their eyebrows, swept off to the side and styled).

Allison: Oh so they brush it off like this (I try to emulate her demonstration).

Madison: Kind of, like... like long hair down to here...and then it's like long hair down to here.

Allison: Ok, ok.

Madison: I really like it.

This dialogue demonstrates that Madison views “girlishness” in female body image as a set of physical traits both superior to “boyish” qualities and as a state of being in need of protection.

Madison also *disdained* certain male bodily grooming habits. She seemed to particularly dislike the sexuality inherent in these grooming habits: deodorant used to prevent the body odor that comes with the onset of male sex hormones and cologne, commonly considered a sexual aphrodisiac. The following conversation occurred while we perused J-14.

(We turn to a page that is advertising “Curve” cologne).

Madison: Curve is for boys.

Allison: Why is it for boys?

Madison: It's a cologne...it smells like it's for boys. My brother owns some.

Allison: How often does he use it?

Madison: All *the time!* And he puts it like (She makes a squirting motion with her hands by her neck and makes two squirting noises). *And my mom and I are like, ew!* And he's like "This baby smells *mmm!*" And he sprays it all over himself, and *sometimes...* and you know what's weird...he does it for his *armpits* too!

Allison: Oh no! Are you sure he just doesn't use deodorant?

Madison: He wears that, sometimes...but then he just dunks on the cologne!

The following discussions further illustrate her strong dislike of male grooming and occurred as we drove to the mall:

Allison: Oh, I didn't get a chance to ask you about this, but I wanted to make sure you were ok with going to the mall because we can go to Target, or some other store if you want to do that instead.

Madison: Definitely the mall.

Allison: Yah, there's more stores there under one roof.

Madison: I hope we can go to some different stores.

Allison: Yes, of course we can do that!

Madison: Um, so my brother goes to this one shop, I don't know what it's called, but it's like...where you walk in and it's this boy without his shirt on, and you can see all of this (She motions to her shoulders, stomach and chest area). And it's like all black and white on the inside, and it has like perfume in it...and *ugh!* (She sighs loudly in disgust). *Ugh, it's so boyish! I hate it! I hate it! I hate it!*

Allison: So you've been in this store before?

Madison: Yah, my mom makes me go into all of these stores that my brother likes when we go shopping together.

As we walk through the mall later on, we come upon a store Madison particularly dislikes:

Madison: This is the store my brother goes in! (The store is called “Hollister,” and she avoids walking towards it).

Allison: Oh, Hollister?

Madison: Yah....ew, *it smells!* Look at it (With disdain, she points to the enlarged photograph of a boy without his shirt on). See *what I mean?*

Allison: Yah. Do you want to go in?

Madison: *Noooo! I hate it! I hate it! Ugh, cover your nose.* The music is playing really loud when you go in and it’s *really* annoying to listen to!

Allison: Ok, let’s keep moving then.

We keep walking and minutes later pass by a similar store called “American Eagle”.

Allison: Do you ever shop at American Eagle?

Madison: Oh no....My brother shops there.

These discussions reveal that while the participant clearly embraced the sexuality oozing from the idyllic, intangible male bodies of popular culture, she remained intolerant of “boyish” material and popular culture. She made a great effort to reject this type of masculinity against her own femininity and position herself as *nothing like “them.”* However, her choice to focus her energies against what she considers “boy culture” is interesting because these shopping venues actually have a wide female client base of upper-elementary, middle and high school students and the grooming habits she rejected in boys (deodorant and perfume) are practiced by pubertal girls just a bit older than she. This pattern replicates the one manifested by the participant earlier when she expressed a desire for a bra but did not include breasts in this desire.

She appears to want the psycho-social “liberation” that comes with pubertal development without a desire for puberty's physical markers such as breasts and body odor. Neither did she desire the pubertal development and consequent grooming habits of her male peers, rejecting deodorant, cologne and perfume with equal ardor. I argue that this bias against puberty signifies a desire to maintain “purity” within her appropriation of the “discourse of pretty.” As discussed earlier, the female body within the “discourse of pretty” *does* ideally exhibit the physical traits of puberty. These physical signifiers are never excessive (to prevent “sluttiness,”) but nonetheless require a set of perky breasts, an hourglass figure (prompted by the widening of the hips throughout puberty) and a taut bottom. In order for this transformation to occur, the original androgyny of the girl's figure is replaced by the development of these sexual signs. But such signs come from puberty alone rather than physical adornment. The androgynous tween, like Madison, can only replicate these signifiers through body surface manipulations such as the breast “cups” of bikinis covering an otherwise flat chest. I believe that the participant desired the subjectivity granted at puberty and the sex appeal inherent in its physical effects on the body but wanted to distance herself from the *uncleanliness* associated with the body actually experiencing pubertal change (body odor, menstruation, etc.). Thus, despite the strength of her desire to embody the “discourse of pretty” she is physically incapable (pre-pubertal) and emotionally unwilling to completely immerse herself in this discourse. The unwillingness may result from her incomplete detachment from the discourses of childhood. Perhaps her body's persistent androgyny coupled with “purity” and “cleanliness” attached to looking “cute” (which displaces bodily materiality into “host” bodies of cartoon figures and stuffed animals) fueled her rejection. Puberty represents a new materiality of the body previously excluded from girl-childhood,

ushering in a new future which she both can and cannot see.

**Chapter IV:**  
**Conclusions**

## Conclusions

This case study of body image in girlhood has attempted to present the transition from girl-childhood to a tween aspirational discourse in the worldview of a seven-year old girl. By using traditional case study techniques—long interviews, personal rapport building and unfocused time spent in various contexts—my goal was to discern as completely as possible my informant's view of tween body image. We talked so I could learn her discourses. In doing so, I avoided lapsing into the well-worn path of “moral panic” as this discourse is devoid of girls' perspectives and reproduces the predictable innocence-to-objectification model as the only viable explanation for the explosion of a sexually-charged and eagerly embraced tween culture. I have used the voice of the participant herself as the basis for my analysis and besides this direct, concrete data, I have drawn from theoretically well-established discourses for instances in which I presented “fact before data.” While this study's case study focus on a tween's worldview of body image manipulation has necessarily avoided imposing an “eroticization crisis” interpretation on the data, I believe that my in-depth interviews and qualitative analyses may bring new information to the debate.

I also suggest that we must shift our perceptions of girl-children's use of their body image to one of emotional, cognitive and bodily sophistication. Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (2005) call for “a more rigorous integration of the way that tweens have been visually constructed if we are to understand the position that they occupy in western culture. The visual is important not only in defining for adults where these girls exist but also for the girls themselves in juxtaposing their self image with the images ‘out there’” (p. 100). The intent of my study is not to diminish concern about girls' appropriation of “sexualizing” body images transmitted by market “predators” because I believe that the standardization of tweens' identities through a homogenous body image in popular culture presents an extremely limiting model for transitional tweens to take up. Instead, I have discovered *through the participant's eyes and voice* that body image can serve as a critical mediating platform for girls' relationships to

popular culture venues and that the nature of their transition to body image manipulation from girl-childhood is an extremely important aspect of their identity work. In addition, while dominant body images in tween culture do commodify girlhood and homogenize a desired type of physical appearance, it is important to recall that body image is meaning-laden for both the subject *and* the viewer and their experiences of the body image *as culturally inscribed text upon the body* may be totally different. Media exploitation is a cultural factor but I modify this argument by suggesting that the extent of their influence must be assessed individually. A case study format, qualitatively deep and participant-focused offers the opportunity to map knowledge from the tween perspective rather than impose conclusions from the outside. As Vollrath argues, “The complex conclusions of investigations of this kind, made visible within a public discourse may contribute to a reconsideration of young girls as producers of culture and as cultural critics with social, cognitive, and emotional stakes in their production and consumption of visual culture” (2006, p. 76).

From this study, it appears evident that if tweens' appropriation of the “discourse of sexy” is to be considered a “problem” in need of “fixing,” one must first identify it as a symptom of the imposed and homogeneous nature of childhood in western culture. Western society predominantly imposes the image and experience of an invented, Romantic childhood upon children while failing to acknowledge that this may not be the way children experience the world for themselves. The juxtaposition of this particular discourse upon the actual, lived experiences of children in a media-driven pop culture creates a perceived disjuncture between imposed fantasy and lived reality. This disjunction creates a desire for transition to an alternative discourse that, while directed towards a particular femininity, may represent a more accurate identity as seen by the tween herself. This is not to call the sexuality of the discourse of pretty a positive alternative to the discourse of childhood nor is it to ignore the influence of popular media in constructing this discourse as the most attractive choice. However, in some cases the discourse of pretty may function as the most accessible and effective progression from the discourse of

girl-childhood, the assumptions of which act to repress the expression of subjectivity. The discourse of pretty is the discourse of risk-taking, excitement and danger and this may feel “closer to the truth” to the girl herself--even if this truth takes a commodified and homogenized form.

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