Women’s Response to Sex-as-Power Imagery on Popular Reality TV Programming

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Abstract
MACKENZIE CATO: Women’s Response to Sex-as-Power Imagery on Popular Reality TV Programming
(Under the direction of Dr. Jane D. Brown)

Focus groups with 38 women from three age cohorts (18-22, 28-36, and 45-56 years old) were conducted to gain a better understanding of how women negotiate meaning when watching reality TV programs that focus on sex-as-power imagery. Sex-as-power imagery was conceptualized as women using overt sexuality to get ahead in their careers, to attain monetary rewards, to express power, and to gain other types of rewards. The women responded to clips from three popular reality shows: Keeping Up with the Kardashians, The Girls Next Door, and My Super Sweet 16.

The Media Practice Model was used to explore how the women’s identities (e.g., as mothers, feminists, Christians) affected their: (1) media selection, including the desire to escape, relax, and fulfill social needs; (2) media interaction, or the negotiation of meaning, including perceptions of realism, enjoyment, and responses to living in a sexualized culture; and, (3) media application, including perceived third-person effects, social comparisons, and pressure to conform to the body standards presented on the shows.

Women across generations were affected by the sexualized images, with frequent viewers more likely to learn from and model behaviors they saw on the shows. Generational differences suggest that media cultures influence identity work and the ways in which women apply what they view to their lives. The younger women enjoyed the shows to relax
and pass time, and were more likely to see the portrayals as normative, accepting sex-as-
power imagery as a valid option for women.

The older women enjoyed the shows primarily as an escape, both from the worries of
their lives and the people in their lives. The older women were concerned for younger
audiences and felt a sexualized self-presentation would translate into sexual behaviors. Social
comparisons opened the door to feelings of pressure, which acted as a driving force for
modification of beliefs and behaviors.

The women’s reactions to the shows suggests that the sexualized individualism
celebrated by the reality TV women masks gender inequalities, undercuts critical
perspectives, and promotes a postfeminist and neoliberal mentality, focused on self-
regulation and personal choice.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

It is almost impossible to turn on the TV, go to the movies, or browse through popular magazines without encountering sexualized images of women. Whether it is using fictional characters, celebrities, or average American citizens, popular culture in the United States is inundated with images of sex-as-power. Current television sitcoms, talk shows, soap operas, and reality TV shows feature young girls and women proudly using their sexuality to get what they want out of life. Popular reality television programs such as The Girls Next Door, The Bad Girls Club, and Keeping Up with the Kardashians feature young women describing their sexualized behavior as empowering and positive. The more sexual they behave, the more they are rewarded in the form of attention, material rewards, and monetary success. As one of Hugh Hefner’s girlfriends featured on The Girls Next Door, suggested, “Our show has a really big female following, and we get a lot of feedback from them. They look up to us because we're in a position where we can pretty much pursue anything we want to do, and they love to see empowered women follow their dreams” (Kugel, 2006).

Complicated and often contested, the negotiation of female empowerment and its relationship to sexuality, agency, and choice continues to dominate feminist dialogue (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000; Levy, 2005). Feminist author Ariel Levy (2006) has written that “the proposition that having the most simplistic, plastic stereotypes of female sexuality constantly reiterated throughout our culture somehow proves that we are sexually liberated and personally empowered has been offered to us, and we have accepted it” (p.
Some theorists think that post feminism might be to blame by promoting sexual promiscuity as a type of political freedom associated with agency and choice, when in reality it works to devalue, break-down, and undermine young women (Eden, 2006; Shalit, 2007). Some cultural critics argue, however, that most young women do not buy into this sex-as-power ideology. Others have argued that this type of ideology does in fact offer women a powerful position from which to develop their own identities.

The overarching purpose of this study was to address the notion of overt sexuality as empowerment by focusing on how women respond to its enactment on reality TV. Overt sex-as-power imagery is conceptualized as women’s use of their bodies and sexuality as a primary means of gaining attention, monetary rewards, power and success. This is one of the dominant forms of sexual agency available to women in the mass media and is increasingly prevalent on popular reality TV shows. According to Durham (2008), “Sexuality is defined in strictly limited (and constraining) terms. So, for many girls, relying on media as a sexual guide is an iffy business: media imagery can be disheartening, anxiety-producing, stressful, and disorienting” (p. 40).

Reality TV is increasingly popular with young women. The majority of viewers watching shows such as The Girls Next Door and Keeping Up with the Kardashians are young women between the ages of 18 and 22 (Edwards, 2004; Ouellette & Murray, 2004). To date few studies of reality TV have focused specifically on viewers’ interpretations of the overt sexuality to gain and wield power portrayed on the shows. The studies that have focused on sex-as-power imagery and reality TV have tended to focus exclusively on the text and the constructed messages within the text, not the young women who are consuming the imagery (Yep & Camacho, 2004; Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006). Feminist media scholars
Lundy, Ruth, and Park (2008) have called for analyses of reality TV to address “reactions to specific programs and program content” to uncover how audiences select, interpret, and apply these cultural texts (p. 223). According to Gill (2008) this trend of overt sexualization as a powerful subject position for women has become “ubiquitous in affluent developed societies understood as being in a post-feminist moment” (p. 5).

This study focused on women of various ages but most extensively on the age group that is increasingly referred to as “emerging adults.” Emerging adults include young people in their late teens to their mid-twenties. The notion of emerging adults is tied to the prolonged experience of the transition from teenager to adult that has been occurring in many developed countries in the past two or three decades (Arnett, 2004). Young people typically leave home at age 18 or 19 but sizeable proportions are putting off getting married, becoming parents, and finding a long-term job until their mid to late twenties, rather than in their late teens or early twenties (Arnett, 2004). This rise in age of marriage and parenting, the lengthening of time spent in higher education, and prolonged job instability are all factors that have led to increased interest in this stage of young people’s lives.

Emerging adulthood is considered an extension of adolescence because emerging adults experience a greater level of freedom to experiment with their own identities. According to Arnett (2004) emerging adulthood is primarily a time for identity explorations or “trying out various possibilities, especially in love and work” and is the most self-focused stage of life (p. 8). Emerging adults are particularly relevant to this study because this age period is a time when young women can explore their sexuality as their identities evolve and mature.
Although this study focused on emerging adult women, the responses from older women who are out of college and at a different stage in their lives are also important. This study thus provided some insight into how responses to sex-as-power imagery on reality TV differs by life stage. This difference is important because the majority of recent studies related to reality TV focused mainly on college-aged participants; few included women from older age groups. One important aspect of this study was its focus on the differences in interpretation of the clips based on age and life stage. This allowed for a richer analysis and a better understanding of the role that age and identity development, play in interpretation of these texts.

Two broad research questions were addressed in this qualitative study of women’s reactions to and interpretations of reality TV programs featuring overtly sexual women:

RQ1: How do women from different age groups respond to the overtly sexualized images presented by women on popular reality TV programming?

RQ2: Are the sexualized images prevalent on reality TV a positive site for self-expression, identity-creation, and enjoyment for female audiences? Or are they (also) a source of anxiety.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

The following review of literature focuses on two relevant bodies of research and theory: sexualized media culture and television’s role in gender and sexual socialization.

Sexualization of Culture

Discussions on the sexualization of culture have become increasingly common in the last decade. Attention has increased with the publication of books such as Ariel Levy’s *Raunch Culture* and M. Gigi Durham’s *Lolita Effect*, and articles in magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek*. In 2006, The American Psychology Association convened a task force dedicated solely to studying the implications of the sexualization of girls in the media. The task force’s report, issued in 2007, generated more discussion and scholarly interest. A recent study focusing on the sexualized nature of advertising found that today’s young women, in comparison with women who participated in a similar study conducted in 1991, were less likely to find overtly sexualized portrayals of women offensive (Zimmerman & Dahlberg, 2008).

Sexuality is a pivotal element in linking gender-based preconceptions to the social construction of inequality (Baldwin, 2000). In groundbreaking research in the late 1980s, Fine (1988) introduced the phrase “the missing discourse of female desire,” as she focused on current conceptions of female sexual agency. Fine suggested that certain socio-cultural
forces worked to de-legitimize and erase girls’ experiences and articulations of sexual agency. Later research built on this notion, arguing that young women’s sexual desire and the reasons why they engage in sexual activity were virtually ignored in research, the popular press, and cultural dialogue. If young women’s sexual activity was discussed, it was almost always with a focus on the pressures young women felt from men or their peers. Women’s sexual activity was rarely discussed as due to their own desire or pleasure (Gill, 2008).

Historically, advertising and other media outlets have been chastised for ignoring women’s desire by presenting women primarily as objects for male consumption and pleasure (Cortese, 1999; Dyer, 1986; Goffman, 1976; Jhally, 1987; Kilbourne, 1999; Myers, 1986; Williamson, 1978). Recent portrayals, however, seem to move women from the role of object to the role of subject with an emphasis on women’s sexual agency (Gill, 2003; Macdonald, 1995; Winship, 2000). With this change has come increased scholarly focus on how empowerment and female sexual agency is packaged in contemporary culture and how these new modes of representation have an impact on society, and especially women.

Gill (2003) suggests, for example, that current images are far less innocent than the earlier depictions of women as objects prominent in the ‘60s and ‘70s because they are happening during a time when women are being told that they can have it all. Cast as a re-sexualization of women’s bodies, some scholars argue that these images put women back in a deeper place of inferiority and oppression because they are being reinvented in contradiction to the significant cultural progress of women (Whelehan, 2000).

Images of women in mainstream media continue to evolve in a direction that suggests sex-as-power is acceptable and enjoyable. According to Attwood (2006) mainstream media present a “sexualized culture,” highlighting the ways in which the rules, regulations, and
categories, originally meant to keep the obscene at bay, continue to be challenged and broken down (p. 6). In this highly sexualized culture, the distinction of taste that governed society in the past is no longer relevant (McNair, 2002).

Some suggest that the trend is apparent in that elements of pornography have seeped into all forms of mass media, representing what some scholars call the “pornification” of mainstream media (McRobbie, 2004; Paul, 2005). McNair (2002) defined “pornochic” as “the representation of porn in non-pornographic art and culture; the pastiche and parody of, the homage to and investigation of porn” (p. 61). The pornographic culture that was once excluded from mainstream media now plays a substantial role in mediated discourses surrounding the construction of femininity (Arthurs, 2004, p. 41). The dominance of sexualized images in the mass media has also been characterized as the rise of “raunch culture” (Levy, 2005) and “corporate pedophilia” (Rush & La Nauze, 2006).

The Campaign for a Commercial Free Childhood, an organization that opposes the sexualization of teens and children, has criticized companies such as Calvin Klein and Abercrombie and Fitch for ad campaigns that have included images that could be drawn from child pornography. In raunch culture female sexual desire is front and center in magazines offering tips for better, hotter sex, books directing young women how to make love like a porn star, and celebrity sex scandals, secrets and fantasies played out for the world to see (Plummer, 1995).

Scholars have identified a recent shift in imagery that has moved women from the role of sex object to the role of active desiring (hetero)sexual subject. Often framed through a discourse of playfulness, freedom, and choice, recent images of strong, successful women are increasingly tied to the possession of the right look and the right body (Gill, 2008). Women’s
capabilities and successes are often tied to their physical appearance and to consumption. In light of these new images of the sexually liberated, seemingly agentic woman, Gill (2008) asks: “Why is the look that women hope to achieve so similar? Why is there no diversity in what constitutes sexuality and sexual desire?” (p. 232). It has been argued that these increasingly popular constructions of female sexuality materialize out of predictable scripts of male sexual fantasy and desire (Jhally, 2007). Thus, it becomes important to ask: Does our current sexualized culture represent the construction of a new femininity? If so, who fits into this new subjectivity and who is excluded?

The often hidden exclusions are important sites of tension for feminist researchers and cultural critics. As McRobbie (2004) argued, women of color, working class women, older women, women with disabilities, women whose bodies do not conform to narrowly defined notions of femininity, women whose sexuality places them outside of a heteronormative value system, and women who do not have the means to participate in a consumption driven definition of empowerment typically are excluded from participating in this new female individualism. These women are excluded because they do not fit neatly (or do not have the means to fit) into the definition of the postfeminist heroine. Cultural technologies, such as the Internet and television shows, do not provide spaces for all women to play with, create, subvert, or renegotiate subjectivities and identities.

According to Bartky (1990) representations of overt sexuality often tied to consumption signals a move from the external male judging gaze to an internal narcissistic self-policing one. In this environment, women spend their time and energy working to master beauty rituals that “produce a subjected, practiced, and inferiorized body,” one that can be viewed as part of an “inequalitarian system of sexual subordination” (Bartky, 1990, p.75).
Power is related to normative regulation and intense self-monitoring, rather than simply seen as a type of domination. Through this normative regulation and self-monitoring, women’s lives become a personal project, a “choice biography,” (Beck, 1992, p. 135) in which young women manage their own personal DIY (do it yourself) project of the self. In this model, the body, and a woman’s attention to it, has replaced the 1950s housewife mentality when the home was the primary arena of focus for women. The body is now considered the place where worth is gauged and where power is negotiated (Gill, 2008).

Holland, et al. (1998) conducted in-depth interviews with emerging adult women in college and argued that their internal self-policing takes the form of a “male inside their head,” preventing them from fully experiencing and enjoying their sexuality and sexual experiences on their own terms (p. 23). In the modern paradigm, heterosexuality is still constructed from a masculine subjectivity and sexual agency becomes deeply rooted in projects of regulation. In other words, women are constantly working to live up to an ideal constructed and valued from a masculine position. The masculine subjectivity leads to the adoption of beliefs supporting the notion that heterosexual femininity is, and should be, a project concerned with making oneself desirable rather than experiencing and expressing one’s own desires (Tolman, 2002). Hess and Ferree (1987) asked the important question: “How much freedom do women have to be sexual and to set the terms of their own sexuality within the constraints of a heterosexist, racist, sexist, and erotophobic system of domination?” (p. 146).

Debate as to whether overt sexual representations offer women a space to express their authentic desires and identities dominates much of current feminist research, popular feminist publications, and feminist cultural dialogue. These analyses have been criticized for
their reliance on the notion of true or authentic desires, versus false or more inauthentic ones. How should a woman’s authenticity be defined and who is privileged in establishing those definitions?

Ultimately, the debate centers on if and how this sexualized type of representation signifies a more advanced form of exploitation or if it does in fact represent progress for women. Some scholars challenge the notion that women’s desire is constructed from a masculine or heteronormative perspective, suggesting that this idea offers a monolithic, negative, and inaccurate view of women’s sexuality (Jackson, 2005). Although women do grow up in a culture that problematizes sexuality, they can and do find outlets to express themselves and to speak about desire and pleasure. Modern communication technologies allow young women to produce unregulated dialogue, in the form of fanzines, blogs, and websites, where it is possible to express and generate their own meanings of sexual desire and pleasure (Harris, 2005).

Others have argued the counterpoint that sexualized subjectivities open up new opportunities for women to take on active, desiring roles as sexual subjects, instead of being presented as passive or victimized. Women are presented as pleasing themselves and sexual agency is embraced rather than portrayed only with the stipulation that women who choose to embrace sexual agency will face grave consequences (Kaplan, 1998).

The prevalence of pornographic elements and narrowly defined sexual subjectivities available in mass media messages continues to spark the interest of academic researchers as well as the popular press. Many of the academic accounts and critiques focus heavily on the role these images play in the development of young women’s identities and social expectations.
Identity Development

Research on young women and sexualized imagery is often discussed in relation to identity development and the perceived consequences of this imagery on young women’s sense of self. Examples of this type of work include Anita Harris’s (2004) *Future Girl: Young women in the 21st Century*, and *Young Femininity: Girlhood, power, and social change*. Many disciplines, including psychology, social psychology, anthropology, sociology, and interdisciplinary fields such as cultural studies, have focused on the concept of identity. It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to do a thorough review of all those literatures. Here I focus on the conceptualizations offered by anthropologists and feminist cultural studies scholars.

According to cultural anthropologist Holland, et al. (1998) “Identity is a concept that figuratively combines the intimate or personal world with the collective space of cultural forms and social relations” (p. 5). Identity work and its relationship to mass media is often discussed in regards to discourses of femininity and how women use these discourses to continually shape their own identities. Developing over a person’s lifetime and constantly in flux, identity development is influenced by media representations that organize and shape conceptions of what it means to be a girl and a woman. Studying these images allows for a better understanding of how certain meanings of femininity become common sense and authoritative (Aapola, Gonick, & Harris, 2005).

Identity development and the notion of self are inherently social (Mead, 1934). Language is used to help compose our notions of self. In this cultural model, the interconnectivity between self, mind, and society is constantly developing, changing, and evolving, suggesting that identity is not essential or determined at birth but is part of a
person’s life development. Social experiences and day-to-day life affects a person’s sense of self and identity work throughout their lives. In light of the contradictory discourses of femininity and sexuality young women face in the current culture, some scholars have called for more theorizing of the changing conditions under which girls and women’s diverse self-making occurs (Aapola, Gonick, & Harris, 2005, p. 7).

According to Reay (2001) “establishing oneself as a particular kind of girl means establishing what one is not or does not want to be” (p. 151). Issues of race, class, and sex undeniably influence the process of identity development and establishing a sense of self. Raced, classed, and sexed femininities are communicated in part through the dominant ideological messages of the mass media.

One example of a dominant ideological message, and one that has been studied extensively, is beauty ideals and what constitutes attractiveness in our culture. Dominant messages suggest that to be successful women must possess the right body. Messages related to what that body looks like are part of the ideological work of images in the mass media. Certain images become normalized and seem as if it is just the way things should be. Ideological messages regarding sexuality and sexual agency also work to normalize what it means to have power, to feel powerful, and what it takes to maintain that power.

**Empowerment Conceptualized**

Empowerment is used in many different contexts and fields, including education, social work, psychology, community development, and women’s development. The evolving nature of empowerment and what women find empowering is an ongoing debate in feminist academic research (Durham, 2008; Gill, 2008; McRobbie, 2004) as well as popular books and articles (Levy, 2005) about sexualized images of women in the mass media.
Historically, empowerment promised women “control over their lives,” (Becker, 2005). From the United Nations to the Association for Women’s Rights and Development, empowerment has the goal of increasing the quality and equality of women’s lives (Batliwala, 1995). But what does empowerment look like? What does it mean for a woman to be empowered?

Sridevi (2005) suggests that the two main facets of empowerment are: “an active multi-dimensional process which enables women to realize their full identity and powers in all spheres of life” and “the ability of women to handle responsibilities, to envision a better future, and to work to overcome the obstacles that confront them” (p. 2). Individually and collectively, women are encouraged through empowerment dialogue to actively seek out opportunities that are empowering. Malhortra et al. (2002) suggest that empowerment contains two important elements that separate it from the concept of power. They argue that empowerment is different because it includes the idea of human agency and of change through process. Consequently, empowerment is seen as a process enabling women to discover new possibilities and new options, in the form of choice (Batliwala, 1995). In other words, empowerment is closely associated with individuals and the choices they make, rather than through collective action or powerful organizations.

Empowerment also signifies a progression from one state, gender inequality, to another state, gender equality. As a result, the empowerment process relinquishes decision-making rights to each individual, challenging the culturally enforced social hierarchy (Rowlands, 1995).

As this project addressed reality television and U.S. popular culture, it is important to note that the reasons for any specific woman’s power or powerlessness vary based on the
cultural norms, beliefs, customs and values through which societies differentiate women and men (Kabeer, 1999). Therefore, the images reality television portrays reflect specific cultural norms, beliefs, and values, each potentially influential in teaching young women what it means to have power, how that power is exercised, and where that power originates. Certain power structures are emphasized through reality television’s representations.

Although, historically, empowerment has suggested the overcoming of gender inequality, empowerment has taken on a new meaning in current mediated images. Studies of youth culture and the representation of strong women on television have identified important themes regarding what it means to be an empowered or powerful woman in the current culture. The social constructions of femininity and the dominant identity positions offered to women in the mass media reveal a great deal about how the culture positions women. According to Skeggs (1997) many of the subject positions that are offered to young women are “almost impossible and uninhabitable as a complete and coherent category” (p. 220).

In the 1960s Betty Friedan described “the feminine mystique” as ultimately an unattainable construction of femininity. The feminine mystique reinforced the notion that women could find fulfillment only in sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal love. Other early studies of the representation of women tended to focus on the distortion of female images as well as the sex role stereotyping that dominated the media landscape (Busby, 1975; Tuchman, 1978).

Researchers also began to focus on how the images worked to “produce modes of subjectivity available to women in contemporary Western culture” (Thornham, 2007, p. 5), focusing on the ideological nature of the images of femininity available to women. Ideology works as a set of ideas, normalizing claims, and structures of values concurrently
incorporating emotion to popularize their appeal and increase the likelihood that people will buy into them (Fegan, 1996; Thompson, 2001). Supporting a neo-Gramscian theory of hegemony, Johnson (2001) argued that “ideologies express degrees of hegemony depending on their ability to reinforce and naturalize power hierarchies and material inequalities” (p. 6).

In light of the hegemonic nature of media images and discourse, identity work can be viewed as occurring individually and collectively through the negotiation of dominant social, material, and discursive practices that define femininity in a young woman’s life. Ultimately, women negotiate their identities through discourses of femininity as well as other categories of social difference (Aapola, Gonick, & Harris, 2005). The mediated images women consume provide definitions of femininity that concurrently structure women’s lives and expectations and, according to Aapola, et al., work to “create marginalized others whose lives, bodies, relationships, and selves do not conform to the dominant images” (p. 6). These unrealistic, albeit normalized, images of femininity work as exclusionary practices prompting young women to create and adopt strategies to find their way when faced with complex histories, new realities, and seemingly unlimited possibilities.

Early research related to women and representation, whether focusing on the distorted images present in the media landscape or the underlying power structures that reinforced those inequalities, were questioned for a number of reasons. The notion that a real woman could be differentiated from the false or packaged woman proved to be problematic because it “presumed a model of identity that was commonly constructed and felt, experienced and understood – largely from a white Western woman’s perspective” (Thornham, 2007, p. 7). The category of all women, one that assumed a commonly experienced identity, became an
outdated assumption, one that was divided by power differences along lines of race, socioeconomic status, nationality, age, and sexual orientation.

**Audience-Centered Research**

In the 1980s, there was a noticeable shift toward theorizing women’s desire and pleasure in relation to media texts that were considered part of women’s genres. Much of this research was audience-centered research, often categorized as reception studies. For example, Coward (1984) sought to understand the ways in which “female desire is constantly lured by discourse that sustains male privilege” while also uncovering the “pleasures which escape, slip out between the cracks and perhaps spell the ruin of existing definitions of female desire” (p. 16). Feminist research on soap operas, romance novels, and daytime talk shows focused on how women responded to certain attributes of the genres, identifying the pleasures women experienced through their consumption. Examples of these pleasures included: (1) self-recognition; (2) finding women placed center stage in a woman’s genre; and (3) participating in a woman’s culture (Thornham, 2007). On the other hand, the containment of women within these genres and their inability to truly challenge patriarchal norms was also identified. The study of women’s pleasure in certain acts of media consumption, as well as the pleasure they find in the content of media texts, became central to many of the reception studies of the ‘70s, ‘80s, ‘90s, and continues today. Understanding the pleasure that women experience from watching reality TV, specifically sex-as-power imagery, was central to my study.

Studies published through the years often have suggested that the constructions of femininity dominating women’s genres could be categorized as contradictory, in some ways seemingly progressive but ultimately always reverting back to conventional lines of
patriarchal relations (Winship, 1980). Janice Radway’s 1987 groundbreaking study on romance novels analyzed the genre’s structural and ideological elements, the negotiated meaning of the women who consumed the romance novels, and the context within which those meanings were created. Focusing on the act of reading, instead of just the meanings behind the reasons for reading or the text, Radway identified a type of oppositional agency. For Radway, the act of reading was a type of agency but it was still bound or contained by the patriarchal power of the text itself.

Ien Ang’s 1987 study of Dutch viewers’ response to the highly popular U.S. television show *Dallas* also focused on agency but did so in a distinctively different way. Focusing on the show’s feminine pleasures (i.e., the way the show produced or enabled a “structure of feeling” that was experienced by its viewers), Ang found that women’s pleasure was in the recognition of an emotional structure, which was felt as real. The shared pleasure and collective fantasy was potentially liberating for female audiences. Brunsdon (2000) categorized this type of work as the “search for female agency” (p. 2). Both Radway and Ang focused on the relationship between the pleasure audiences experience and the conservative elements of the text being consumed. This struggle still continues to dominate much of the research relating to popular culture, consumption, and audience pleasure.

Additionally, the relationship between the feminist researcher and the “everyday” woman (i.e., the audience) was central to reception studies, such as Radway and Ang’s work, as well as to the development of feminist media studies related to power, agency, and choice. This tension is described by Thorham (2007) as “the struggle to determine the precise relationship between the feminist researcher, who possesses intellectual capital and interpretive power, and the women she studies, who do not, and whose positioning as
feminine subject she therefore both shares and does not share” (p. 11). In a similar vein, the assumption that the politicized intellectual can speak for all women or in some cases oppressed women continues to be addressed in current feminist media research.

This balancing act is important as mediated images of women continue to move in a direction that places sex and sexual power at the core of women’s representation. Audience-centered research related to the categorization of empowering images, the pleasure derived from consuming these images, and the ways in which young women respond contribute to a better understanding of this tension.

**Feminist Media Studies**

In America today, empowerment of women increasingly seems to mean the sexual exhibitionism apparent in popular reality shows geared to young adult audiences. As suggested earlier, mainstream media currently is presenting what could be called a sexualized culture, suggesting a breakdown of the rules, categories, and regulations meant to keep the obscene at bay (Attwood, 2006). As cultural rules evolve, mediated images of women reflect changing attitudes about sexuality and the relationship of sexuality and power.

Arthurs (2004) argued that the women’s movement significantly began to influence television portrayals in the 1980s. Television shows such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show, Designing Women, Murphy Brown,* and *Roseanne* offered images of autonomy, achievement, and competence, with limited focus on sex and sex appeal. This form of autonomous empowerment gave way to a cultural emphasis on girl power in the mid ‘90s. Originally associated with the Riot Grrrl movement, a loosely formed movement of young, mostly white, middle-class women, girl power represented a desire to reclaim the word “girl” in an effort to disassociate from the adult patriarchal world of status and hierarchies (Hesford,
According to Gonick (2006) “this form of girl power celebrated the fierce and aggressive potential of girls” and was in response to sexism, elitism, and violence experienced by women in the punk scene during this time (p. 6).

The concept of “girl power” articulated various forms of femininity and over time garnered multiple interpretations. Carlip (1995) described the term “girl power” as the process of overcoming personal struggle and finding oneself. Aapola, Gonnick, and Harris (2005) described the term at least in early manifestation as signifying the “feminist ideal of a new, robust, young woman with agency and a strong sense of self” (p. 39).

Early notions of girl power quickly morphed, however, into a marketing slogan for companies hoping to target women to buy their products. Girl power became more about making the right social statement through the consumption of products rather than about making a political statement. Whereas the initial Riot Grrrls movement hinged on anti-consumer culture, this new form of girl power was inundated with consumerism (Jacques, 2001). A focus on individual development and finding a voice evolved into the current representation of the empowerment paradigm portrayed by many young women in today’s media landscape. According to Newsom (2005), “girl power became a pleasure-centered form of female empowerment” and the “manifestation of girl power in the media is a site of negotiation between the stereotypical construct of traditional feminine and an empowered active female” (p. 5). This type of consumerist empowerment suggested agency but was limited by oppressive social structures, thus creating “agency masked by stereotype” (Newsom, 2004).

The media image of the empowered woman included some progressive facets but was still saturated in sex and stereotypes. The Spice Girls, Buffy, the vampire slayer, Xena, the
princess warrior, Sabrina, the teenage witch, and Ally McBeal were deemed empowering, representing a “hypersexualized and highly stylized version of girl power” (Gonnick, 2006, p. 8). Mediated versions of women’s empowerment became more about individuals negotiating their role in the system and less about focusing on or fixing structural inequalities. The dominant representations of the Nineties suggested individual progress but were lacking in attempts to change existing patriarchal inequalities.

Popular shows, such as Sex and the City, which premiered in 1998, offered new images of empowerment focused on sexual liberation, ones that featured single, successful, and independent working women. Female viewers were positioned to relate to one of the four main characters in Sex and the City. The women on the show often discussed and categorized this type of autonomous independence and sexual freedom as a form of empowerment. Critics argued that the exploration of sexual independence and autonomy proved successful on these shows as a result of their comedic excess and contradictory texts (Arthurs, 2004).

The definition of empowerment and empowering images in the media continues to evolve. Once a consciousness-raising descriptor used to identify a strong, independent, and liberated woman, empowerment has increasingly become a term used to describe individual choice and sexual subjectification. On current reality television programming, the “empowerment” of women is increasingly used to describe sexual behavior. It is used to describe going to strip clubs (where only women strip), participating in exhibitionist behavior, posting promiscuous images and descriptions of sexual activities on social networking sites, promoting porn stars as role models, and wearing merchandise bearing traditionally sexist symbols such as the Playboy Bunny. The latest “empowered” fitness craze is stripping, lap, and pole dancing. Stripping classes have also become increasingly
popular as a fun and “empowering” activity for bachelorette parties. As women buy stiletto heels, Brazilian waxes and stripper poles, the push for female empowerment often ends up looking more like the fulfillment of male fantasies (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000).

For many young women the most prevalent images of empowerment are commercialized and consumed through the mass media. Media images that depict strong women exerting control, making decisions, actively participating, and challenging inequalities in their surroundings offer young women one definition of empowerment, while media images that portray women as oversexed, exhibitionistic, and objectified offer a different one.

**Postfeminist Definitions of Empowerment**

Postfeminism is an often-contested term that is commonly linked to discussions of female empowerment, sexualized images of women, and issues of agency and choice. Postfeminist theory as applied to the media is described by Lotz (2001) as “a useful theoretical framework for understanding discourse in contemporary series, recent character representations, and the corresponding cultural atmosphere” (p. 106). It is important to stress that there is little agreement as to the development, meaning, or cultural shifts related to postfeminism and postfeminist theory. Postfeminism is interesting, nevertheless, to media scholars who deal with representations of women and the different ways in which meaning is negotiated through the visual form. Postfeminist theory has been applied to media texts in a variety of ways (Lotz, 2001).

Rosenfield and Stacey (1987) defined postfeminism as “an emerging culture and ideology that simultaneously incorporates, revises, and depoliticizes many of the fundamental issues advanced by second-wave feminism” (p. 549). One of the implications of
postfeminism is that the need for feminism has subsided, or as a 1998 cover for *Time Magazine* suggested: “Feminism is Dead.” This belief was rampant in 1980s’ media portrayals, even though, as Faludi (1991) documented and Dow (1991) summarized, women were far from equal when it came to pay, opportunity, or representation in all sectors of the workplace. As early as 1982, a *New York Times*’ cover story written by Susan Bolotin discussed the reasoning behind some young women’s rejection of the feminist label, attributing it to a postfeminist mentality.

Press (1991) also used postfeminism to characterize women’s resistance to second wave feminist politics in 1980s fictional television, arguing that postfeminism signified a time when women stopped challenging the role they historically were expected to play in the family as well as the roles, norms, and qualities traditionally associated with the feminine. Dow (1996) suggested that postfeminism represents “a hegemonic negotiation of second-wave ideals, in which the presumption of equality for women in the public sphere has been retained” (p. 88). Dow suggested further that postfeminist rhetoric “produces postfeminist thought’s most powerful framing device: patriarchy is gone and has been replaced by choice” (p. 95).

Lotz (2001) suggested that certain attributes of cultural narratives are representative of postfeminist discourse. Through narratives, postfeminist discourse explores power relationships in women’s lives. Postfeminist narratives often address and play with feminist solutions, focusing on the struggles that women face in their personal and professional lives (Lotz, 2001). Feminist cultural studies have been concerned with how television constructs pleasure through the appeal of lifestyle aesthetics and consumption. As a result, it is not uncommon to see the postfeminist backlash linked to a consumer-driven mentality that
stresses sexualized beauty ideals and increasingly restrictive body norms. McKenna (2006) drew attention to the contradiction between “feminist principles such as professional gender equality and the individualizing emphasis on feminine looks and sexualized beauty” as well as “sexual objectification and the male gaze” (p. 58). Postfeminist television is also characterized by its maintenance of traditional feminine boundaries with an emphasis on sexual agency as primarily an aesthetic choice.

Thus, postfeminism has been categorized as a type of feminism after (or in response to) the second wave of feminism, a regressive political stance, and/or as a sensibility that speaks to the ways in which gender is articulated in contemporary media. The entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist themes speaks to the contradictory nature of postfeminism.

Although postfeminist discourse relies heavily on the rhetoric of choice, feminist scholars argue that postfeminism actually functions as a type of regulatory program or silencing. In other words, young women might know and understand the debates and criticism surrounding objectified or sexualized images of women but they are positioned (invited and expected) to refrain from being critical. As modern sophisticated postfeminist women, they are expected to “get it” (McRobbie, 2004, p. 255). Getting it includes accepting the idea that modern feminism is over and done with and participating in self-objectification and/or self-sexualization is no longer oppressive when it is done with a knowing wink. In this instance sexualizing the self becomes a choice women make that is done for enjoyment, pleasure, and personal satisfaction – it is empowering. The important critical questions then become: In what ways are young women positioned to withhold critical positions against commercially produced sexual representations? In what ways are they positioned to accept them?
Reality Television

Reality television often incorporates postfeminist rhetoric of the modern sophisticated woman who “gets it.” Reality television emerged as a dominant genre in the late 1980s. Some critics argue that reality TV represents the lowest common denominator for television content because it highlights questionable social behaviors and glamorizes a culture of exhibitionism and voyeurism (Reiss & Wiltz, 2004). Others categorize the genre as one with unlimited possibilities for empowering and engaging audiences (Wong, 2001). The popularity of reality TV, specifically with young female audiences, makes it a rich site for analysis of reaction to postfeminist representations.

Since the late 1990s, reality television has established itself as a staple in the television world. In 2000, the reality game-show Survivor, rated number one in its timeslot, earned CBS an estimated $50 million in advertising revenue. In 2002, American Idol attracted nearly 25 million viewers two nights in a row, breaking the network’s record for non-sports programming (Hill, 2005). According to Hill, “reality programs regularly win the highest ratings for the majority of half-hour time slots during primetime American television” and are the “crack cocaine of programming” (p. 6).

As the diversity and number of reality shows grew, it became increasingly difficult to define the genre. Nabi, Biely, Morgan, and Stitt (2003) suggested that reality television is centered on real people’s lives (not actors), incorporates a narrative, and lacks a script or studio set but that audiences still perceive the genre as only moderately real. Others have defined the category more broadly to include news programs, talk shows, and documentaries (Potter et al., 1997). Hall (2006) found that audiences’ decisions about what constituted a reality program were not uniform across and within groups but that one common attribute
associated with reality shows was that “they tended to focus on negative circumstances or behavior by pointing out people’s problems” and “highlighting the worst in people” (p. 198). Unpredictability was also commonly identified as a dominant characteristic of the genre.

Some scholars have focused on the notion of real lives, defining reality TV as the documentation “of events in the lives of individuals or groups” and “the attempt to simulate such real-life events through various forms of dramatized reconstruction” (Kilborn, 1994, p. 423). Hill (2005) described reality programming as “a catch-all category that includes a wide range of entertainment programmes about real people” (p. 2).

For the purpose of my study, reality TV was defined using Nabi Et al.’s (2003) definition of reality TV, which suggested that the genre includes “programs that film real people as they live out events in their lives, contrived or otherwise, as they occur” (p. 304).

The growing body of research surrounding reality TV generally focuses on one of two categories: analysis of individual programming or analysis of the emerging genre as a whole (Nabi, 2007). Recently, there has been increased interest in shows centered on competition, such as Survivor (Edwards, 2004; Patkin, 2003; Roth, 2003; Smith & Wood, 2003) and The Amazing Race (Edwards, 2004).

One increasingly popular format in reality programming is the documentation of the lives of celebrities, such as: Giuliana & Bill; Tori and Dean: Home Sweet Hollywood; and Kimora: Life in the Fab lane. Showcasing wealth and glamour in a humanizing way, Andrejevic (2003) suggests that such shows “offer to make real people out of stars” (p. 11). On the flip side, outdated stars often use reality TV as an attempt to restart their fading careers (The Two Coreys, My Fair Brady, and Breaking Bonaduce). Many reality shows, however, rely on nonprofessionals to lure audiences in with the promise of spectacle, real,
and unpredictable content, for example the Bachelor and Bachelorette series and the Real Housewives series, just to name a few.

Regardless of the category, reality television programs often exploit elements of stereotypical female representation to the fullest. Popular reality shows frequently focus on and encourage competitive, aggressive, or sexualized behaviors for women on shows such as Survivor, Road Rules, and Amazing Race or as they carry out their ‘normal’ daily lives on shows such as Keeping Up with the Kardashians or The Girls Next Door.

The Spectacle of Reality TV. Reality TV has been compared to the genre of daytime talk shows. Similarities across the genres include their ability to create audiences by: (1) breaking cultural rules; (2) managing shocks; (3) shifting the audience’s conceptions of what is acceptable; (4) transforming the bases for cultural judgment; (5) redefining deviance and appropriate reactions to it; and, (6) eroding social barriers, inhibitions, and cultural distinctions (Abt & Seesholtz, 1994, p. 171). These characteristics allow TV to make a spectacle of everyday life.

Reality shows such as MTV's The Real World and Road Rules, or the ever-popular Survivor and Big Brother series exemplify components of what Kellner (2003) calls the “culture of the spectacle” (237). The spectacle of sex has become one of the mainstays of popular culture, especially in the world of reality TV. Competitive reality shows involving sex, dating, and marriage, such as The Bachelor, The Bachelorette, and Bachelor Pad, feature men and women as they take part in sex-infused competitions. In such shows, the commodification of sex is often central to the plotlines, the young women’s careers, and their identities. The buying and selling of everyday images that are influenced by elements of pornography has transformed sex from being something taboo and privately consumed to
something that is consumed and enjoyed in many forms of popular culture (Attwood, 2004; McNair, 2006). According to Streitmatter (2004) reality TV is the “latest venue for heavy-on-the-sex programming” which objectifies women, glorifies casual sex and infidelity, and connects sex and deceit (223). It thus becomes important to ask the question: Do audiences find such appropriation of pornographic codes normal and have such portrayals become part of what female audiences expect?

Studies have also focused on the ways in which audiences think about and interact with reality TV. Lundy, Ruth and Park (2008) found in a qualitative study that viewers recognized the stigma associated with watching reality TV but that the pleasure of escapism and social affiliation outweighed the stigma. Issues of escapism, historically discussed in relation to women’s genres, provide an interesting framework with which to address reality TV. As Spence (2005) points out, the disclaimer of “it’s just an escape” does little to explain the forms pleasure takes or the struggle of ideology within those pleasures. This type of enjoyment or pleasure (i.e., escape) can play an important role in the construction of self and the perpetuation of certain emotions, values, and needs.

A few scholars have studied the gender portrayals in reality programming, focusing on shows such as Joe Millionaire (Graham-Bertolini, 2004; Moorti & Ross, 2004), The Bachelor (Schwartz, 2004; Yep & Camacho, 2004), The Real World (Edwards, 2004) and Wife Swap (Fairclough, 2004). Edwards (2004) examined the genre’s use of repetitive gender role stereotypes as a “stock troupe,” suggesting that “gender emerges in reality programming as a set of generic conventions in which individual shows frequently transgress and then reassert traditional gender role expectations” (p. 226).
Neoliberalist Rhetoric and Reality TV. In addition to normalizing certain gender role stereotypes and sex-as-power imagery, reality TV also works to cultivate participants’ and audiences’ ability to successfully manage their lives. Reality TV’s preoccupation with self-work and its underlying support of privatization, personal responsibility, and consumer choice are central components to the neo-liberal framework often used to analyze television. Neo-liberalism is based on the idea that “minimal government intervention and unrestricted (i.e., “liberal”) manufacturing, commerce, and trade are the key to economic growth” (Ouellette & Hay, 2008, p. 3). The emphasis on minimal government has been labeled the “reinvention of government,” a political push to counter the liberalist policies of the 1930s-1960s (Ouellette & Hay, 2008). In the neoliberal model, making it in U.S. society becomes contingent on self-management, effort, and smart choices. In the neoliberal model, individuals are responsible for their lives and the people who fail are conversely cast as irresponsible, lazy, and aberrant (Harris, 2004).

A key problem with neo-liberal theory is its neglect of class inequalities that are deeply ingrained in categories like gender, nationality, and race. Neo-liberalism promises choice, autonomy, and freedom all the while masking and downplaying the circumstances that make this reality virtually impossible for the majority of people (Harris, 2004). Opportunities and outcomes are cast solely as the responsibility of individuals with the structural barriers and policies that favor only a select few being invisible or ignored.

Studying television’s role as a social institution and the ways in which it works to structure and advance notions of “good” citizenship has informed some of the research on reality TV and issues of female empowerment. Scholars suggest that reality TV works textually as a type of pedagogy, providing examples for how young women should conduct
and empower themselves as enterprising members of society (Ouellette & Hay, 2008). Reality TV acts as a type of social technology that reinforces the ways in which women realize their full identity, learn that they can handle new responsibilities, and learn how to work to overcome obstacles that confront them. In a neoliberalist model, women have only themselves to blame if they are not successful. In a neoliberalist model, there is no need for a movement such as feminism because it is up to the individual to succeed through hard work and determination.

A central goal of this study is to address the assumption that reality TV serves these pedagogical functions by focusing on how the audience uses, responds to, and incorporates reality television shows into their lives.

Many popular reality TV shows are based on the idea of personal transformation. Shows such as *What not to Wear*, *Dr. 90210*, and *Beauty and the Geek* are about transforming the individual (often women) into good citizens. The shows offer young women a standard with which they should identify. Young women are taught to take responsibility and learn to maximize their own potential through consumption. In popular reality TV shows, success is often tied to consumption – having the right body, the right clothes, the right haircut, and the right accessories. And if/when they fail, the message of many of these reality shows is that the women have only themselves to blame (Morreale, 2007; Pitts-Taylor, 2007).

McRobbie (2003) suggested that the emphasis on discipline and consumption leads to self-monitoring subjects who have to constantly manage every aspect of their lives. Their life plans, calorie intakes, what they buy, what they say, and what they do all are intensely scrutinized. Successful citizens are expected to adopt a DIY (do-it-yourself) attitude to fulfill
their potential. For women a sleek, controlled body is often the key to displaying success (Bordo, 1993). In this case, femininity is closely related to possessing the right things. The women who are excluded are the ones who cannot afford to consume or who do not fit the rigid standards. Reality TV reinforces these norms by teaching women how to transform their lives and suggests that this type of transformation is an important part of being a woman (Ouellette & Hay, 2008). With the right tools and the right expertise, anyone can transform themselves. It is suggested that reality TV operates as a type of social pedagogy, teaching audiences what it means to be good citizens.

Thus, it is important to address the types of lessons that are taught as well as the ways in which young women respond to reality TV. It becomes important to ask: Do young women who frequently watch reality TV adopt a neoliberal perspective? Most reality TV shows that focus on women’s lives incorporate elements of the flexible subject – a woman who is willing to work on, change, and transform herself to feel powerful and find success. Reality television and the neoliberalist framework speak to how that success is defined and what it means to be a successful woman in contemporary U.S. society. In many of the popular reality shows, a sexualized body becomes the dominant, if not sole, source of power and identity for women. Do young women buy into the notion that the refashioning of one’s body is the ultimate marker of empowerment?

The sexualization of popular culture continues to spark conversations related to female empowerment and what it means to be a modern woman in today’s society. Reality television offers a myriad of images centered on this personification, with many of them saturated in traditional pornographic cues. These shows are geared toward young female audiences and offer narrow and exclusionary examples of self-presentation. Audience-
centered research is needed to address the role these shows play in women’s identity work, as well as their conceptions of female empowerment. Do female audiences see the popular construction of femininity, which is focused on an overtly sexual presentation, as being as exclusionary as scholars suggest or do they embrace it as progress? The importance of popular culture in the construction of self and the perpetuation of certain emotions, values, and needs motivated this study. What function do popular reality TV shows serve for their female audiences? These questions were addressed by exploring female audiences’ identity constructs, their media selections, the way they interact with the shows they watch, and, finally, the way they apply what they see to their lives. The next chapter outlines the Media Practice Model, which served as a framework for organizing the process under investigation.
CHAPTER 3
THEORETICAL POSITIONS

The Media Practice Model

The Media Practice Model, created by Steele and Brown (1995) and Steele (1999) provides a comprehensive and contextual framework for analyzing the process of media use by audiences. Developed from ethnographic research with adolescents, the Media Practice Model focuses on four main components: environmental and personal factors, selection of media, interaction, and application. The model is circular in nature, suggesting that media use is active and interactive, with the media consumer both affected by and affecting the media they consume. The model emphasizes the role of identity development and assumes that the person’s notions of self and personal identity play a powerful role in the decisions they make about media consumption. The Media Practice Model is presented in Figure 1.
Identity. The MPM begins with identity, which is assumed to be a dominant factor in the decisions people make about which types of media to consume. Rather than seeing the self as stable or essentialized, this view supports the notion that the self is a collaborative venture between subjects and their social environments. In other words, people’s choice of
media and interaction with media are affected by who they are and who they want to be at a particular moment. The model also assumes that identity and media use is affected by the person’s lived experience, which speaks to the role various factors such as gender, race, and ethnicity play in day-to-day life.

According to Holland, et al. (1998) “Identity is a concept that figuratively combines the intimate or personal world with the collective space of cultural forms and social relations” (p. 5). Developing over a person’s lifetime and constantly in flux, gender identity is influenced by media representations that organize and shape conceptions of what it means to be a girl and a woman. The MPM posits that facets of identity are intrinsic to the media selection process.

**Selection.** According to Paparcharissi and Mendelson (2007), the viewers of reality TV more often than not are viewing out of habit rather than for specific needs. The reasons why audiences habitually view certain types of reality shows could be different, however. This study is designed to identify the specific motivations for viewing reality TV programs that feature women who use sex as their primary source of power.

Media selection deals with what types of media and content are chosen and the processes that influence these choices. Uses and gratifications theory is useful in discussing the motivations for selecting certain types of television programming or the act of watching TV in general. The uses and gratifications approach addresses the nature of audience involvement and the gratification fulfillments met by watching television. Developed by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch in 1974, the original uses and gratifications approach suggested that the “social and psychological origins of needs lead to differential patterns of media exposure resulting in needs gratifications and other consequences, perhaps mostly
According to Rubin (1994) contemporary uses and gratifications theory is informed by five assumptions, including: (1) “communication behavior, including media selection and use, is goal directed, purposive, and motivated;” (2) “people take the initiative in selecting and using communication vehicles to satisfy felt needs or desires;” (3) “a host of social and psychological factors mediate people’s communication behavior;” (4) “media compete with other forms of communication (i.e., function alternatives) for selection, attention, and use to gratify our needs or wants;” and (5) “people are typically more influential than the media in the relationship, but not always” (Rubin, 1994, p. 420).

The uses and gratifications approach has been used to study reality TV. Jones (2003) conducted quantitative and qualitative interviews to determine how the perceived realism of the show Big Brother affected fans’ desire to watch the show and their enjoyment of the show. Nabi, Biely, Morgan, and Stitt (2003) confirmed that reality TV programming fulfills different gratifications for regular viewers versus occasional viewers. Reiss and Wiltz’s (2004) study suggested that viewing reality TV may boost a person’s self-esteem. This notion that viewers may feel more important when seeing others in precarious situations has been called downward social comparison (Festinger, 1954). Downward social comparison occurs when “viewers feel they are more important (have higher status) than the ordinary people on reality television shows” (Reiss & Wiltz, 2004, p. 373).

Reiss and Wiltz (2004) found that viewers of reality TV were able to gratify certain needs, such as status seeking, vengeance, and escape. Oliver and Armstrong (1995) also found that reality TV viewers were able to gratify certain needs related to violence and authoritarianism, suggesting that reality TV may give viewers the chance to judge and/or feel superior to the people they see on the screen. Nabi et al., (2003) suggested that the viewers in
their sample enjoyed reality TV because of its portrayal of real people, their self-disclosure, the insight into everyday life it afforded, and the unscripted nature of the programming. Nabi et al.’s results, contrary to Reiss and Wiltz as well as Oliver (2003), suggests that many people watch reality TV because it offers them a level of intimacy and connection with the participants on the shows. Nabi et al.’s study also suggested that the drama and interpersonal interactions between the characters are appealing to audiences.

One of the purposes of the focus groups in this study was to focus specifically on the reasons why women watch shows that feature sex-as-power imagery, why they seek them out or are less likely to change the channel if they come across one. This will lead to a better understanding of the uses and gratifications driving women’s decisions to watch shows that focus heavily on sex-as-power imagery.

**Interaction.** The third element, interaction, in the MPM deals with how meaning is negotiated. According to Livingstone (1998) “Interpretation focuses on the ways in which texts involve narrative or conventional frames, create cultural connections, and resonances and implicate mythic or ideological meanings” (p. 176). Interpretation is understood as a product of the viewer’s experience, including their beliefs, understandings, emotional concerns, motives for watching, personal experience and social knowledge. By exploring interpretation in this sense, the text is viewed as polysemic and open and the audience is viewed as an active participant in the construction of meaning (Livingstone, 1998).

The media provide us with much of the material upon which we build our picture of social reality. Audiences interact with media or "negotiate" meaning according to individual factors: personal needs and anxieties, attitudes, family and cultural background, beliefs about gender and race, and so forth. The experience of viewing is both socially and culturally
located, shaping the interpretive process of viewing. As a result, audiences respond to texts in a variety of ways – sometimes critical, sometimes playful – but always contextually meaningful (Livingstone, 2008).

For the purposes of this study, media interaction refers to how viewers relate to the reality TV women, if and how they critique their motives, behaviors, and lifestyles, and how they position themselves in relation to the women. In other words, do the women from the focus groups identify with the reality TV women or do they view them as “others”?

Media enjoyment is central to the interaction process. Media enjoyment has been studied extensively across a broad range of media genres, including sports (e.g., Gantz & Wenner, 1995), horror films (e.g., Johnston, 1995), and children’s programs (e.g., Valkenburg & Cantor, 2000). While most studies focus on the personality traits that predict the likelihood that certain individuals are predisposed to enjoy and seek out certain types of media, the current study focused on enjoyment as a part of the interaction process viewers experience after they’ve selected the program to view.

Although enjoyment is generally discussed as a global reaction to media content, Nabi & Krcmar (2004) suggests that it is also important to consider the “more experiential nature of the viewing dynamic” (p. 290). In relation to the MPM, it is important to look at enjoyment as a reflection of the process of interaction and part of the larger media experience influenced by facets of identity. The focus of enjoyment here is not about liking or seeking out a particular form of media but more about the process of experiencing it and enjoying (or not enjoying) the experience or interaction with the content. Enjoyment, in this case, is different from attraction, appreciation, or preference, which would all fit nicely into the uses and gratifications approach. Enjoyment, from this perspective is more process-oriented,
focusing on the viewing experience, the interaction, rather than the selection, assessment, or evaluation (Nabi & Krcmar, 2004).

Nabi and Krcmar (2004) suggest there are two underlying elements of enjoyment, including: (1) message-related, “the extent to which the content was evaluated positively or negatively, based on cognitive and affective assessments;” and (2) experience-related, “the extent to which the consumption experience is itself pleasurable, based on a broader range of information, including social or environmental factors” (p. 291). For example, a person may not find the movie “Super Bad” enjoyable in terms of the messages conveyed, but may enjoy the experience of watching it with his or her friends who laugh uncontrollably at the content.

Nabi and Krcmar (2004) developed a tripartite model for conceptualizing enjoyment, which hinges on three antecedent components of enjoyment, including cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses to media messages. The cognitive component focuses on judgment of characters’ actions, assessment of storyline, or issues of relevance, realism, and similarity. The affective component focuses on emotional responses to the characters or plot. An example might be the empathy (e.g., Zillmann, 1991) or identification the viewer feels toward a character on a certain show. Audiences often experience feelings of pleasure, shock, sadness, anger, or fear while watching a particular TV show or film (Knobloch, 2003; Miron, 2003; Oliver, 2003).

The behavioral component of enjoyment focuses on viewing intent as well as the act of viewing itself, which is most relevant in the interaction stage of the MPM. The behavioral component refers to four types of behaviors, including: (1) “past or ongoing viewing experience;” (2) “past behaviors related to the message content;” (3) “behavioral intentions regarding the content held by the viewer;” and (4) “behaviors during watching” (Nabi &
Krcmar, 2004, p. 294). One example of a behavior that would fall into this dimension is the development of parasocial relationships with media characters. In this instance, enjoyment might increase because the viewer feels a connection to the media character.

It is important to look at how the different types of information (cognitive, affective, and behavioral) affect enjoyment because it helps explain the reactions audiences might have to these messages and the way they interact with the texts. It is also important to differentiate between enjoyment of a genre, a specific program, a particular episode, and elements within the program (Nabi & Krcmar, 2004). Focusing on enjoyment in this way allows for a better understanding of the behavioral outcomes that might follow enjoyment (or lack of enjoyment) of a show.

Focusing on enjoyment also helps explain why someone who does not necessarily like violent films might enjoy watching a movie like The Borne Identity. They might enjoy it for other reasons. Or in relation to this study, focusing on enjoyment might lead to a better understanding of why someone who says they do not like reality TV might find that they do in fact watch reality TV on a regular basis. Or it might help to explain why someone who generally would be offended by overt sex-as-power imagery might find herself enjoying a show like The Girls Next Door.

**Application.** The “Application” phase of the Media Practice Model deals with how the media fit into the lives of those who are consuming the text. In media studies, cultivation theory is often used to explain the process by which people use and incorporate media into their daily lives. A general premise of cultivation theory is that television communicates the most broadly shared images and messages and thus acts as a key social storyteller in our culture (Gerbner, et al., 1994). Cultivation theory addresses the relationship between
television content and viewers’ ideas about social reality (Gerbner, 1969). Cultivation theory’s framework originates from the assumption that heavy exposure to consistent cultural imagery, such as sexualized images of women on television, shapes frequent viewers’ concepts of reality (Gerbner, 1977).

Cultivation theorists argue that television viewing has long-term effects, which are gradual and indirect but at the same time cumulative and significant (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999). Gerbner (1977) argued that cultivation is not a linear, unidirectional, mechanical "effect," but part of a continual, dynamic, ongoing process of interaction among messages and contexts. Shanahan and Morgan (1999) summarized the hypothesis of cultivation as, “watching a great deal of television will be associated with a tendency to hold specific and distinct conceptions of reality, conceptions that are congruent with the most consistent and pervasive images and values of the medium” (p. 3). As common themes remain consistent across programming, the status quo is maintained (Signorielli & Kahlenberg, 2001).

Research has supported the cultivation hypothesis in relation to racism (e.g., Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, 1982), gender stereotypes (e.g., Gross & Jeffries-Fox, 1978; Morgan, 1982) and expectations of divorce (e.g., Segrin & Nabi, 2002).

Early content analyses conducted in the tradition of cultivation theory documented that television content was remarkably consistent across time and channels (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). The consistency of content assumption has been challenged, however, since television today offers viewers multiple TV stations, programming, and choices. In light of the media options available to audiences, Hawkins and Pingree (1980) suggested that the cultivation effect is stronger when people watch the same genre of programming. Recent
Cultivation theory asserts that long-term exposure to television has subtle and cumulative effects that shape audiences’ views of social reality. Cultivation theory also asserts that heavy (more frequent) television viewers have a stronger tendency to perceive the world in a way that correlates with the televised reality of the genres they repeatedly consume. Over time, heavy viewers begin to see the televised reality as their own social reality. Heavy television viewers and viewers who generally watch the same genre of programming will be more likely to adopt the televised ideals as their own. Theoretically, the explanation for such effects focuses on the cognitive processes underlying them (e.g., Shrum, 1995), specifically the ways in which viewers use constructs from memory to process media imagery.

Cultivation Theory speaks primarily to the ways in which television affects audiences’ perceptions of reality, but says little about how such perceptions might affect subsequent behavior, or the process by which television viewing may affect behavior. Social Cognitive Theory helps explain possible behavioral effects of television exposure.

**Social Cognitive Theory.** A primary assumption of Social Cognitive Theory is that behaviors, cognitions, biological and environmental influences each affect the other (Bandura, 1994). According to Social Cognitive Theory, four primary capabilities affect an individual’s ability to learn new behaviors. These distinctly human characteristics allow audiences to process, retain, and use coded information they see on television, such as strong and empowered women (Bandura, 1994). The four characteristics are the ability to symbolize, self-regulate, self-reflect, and learn vicariously. Each of these characteristics is
essential in the process of understanding how young women might use television to learn what empowerment means and to possibly emulate what they see.

The ability to symbolize is central to Social Cognitive Theory. Social Cognitive Theory supports the assumption that “a remarkable capacity for symbolization provides humans with a powerful tool for comprehending their environment and for creating and regulating environmental events that touch virtually every aspect of their lives” (Bandura, 1994, p. 62). It is through symbols that people take their experiences and transform them into cognitive models that they then use to guide judgment and action (Bandura, 1994). Television uses a wide range of symbols to communicate messages to young women in the audience. Showing young women commonly exerting power through their sexuality and through sexual innuendo may suggest that sex equals power for women.

According to Bandura, (1989) “The self-regulation of motivation, affect, and action operates partly through internal standards and evaluative reactions to one’s own behavior” (p. 56). As people in an individual’s environment respond positively or negatively to the individual’s behaviors, the individual may begin to modify his/her behaviors to seek a positive response. Individuals look to other people’s thoughts and actions as a sounding board, comparing them to their own in an attempt to determine their validity (p. 65). This process often results in the confirmation of stereotypes and misconceptions (Hendriks, 2002). Television often validates and reinforces faulty thinking. For example, the belief that sexuality equals power might be validated by observing models on television getting positive feedback from others on the show for sexual behavior.

Observational learning or vicarious processes refer to a person’s ability to learn from observed experience instead of direct personal experience. Television portrays behaviors that
audiences vicariously experience. As life experiences are more limited, people often use vicarious experiences, such as the behavior of people on television, to learn new patterns of behavior (Bandura, 1994). In other words, young women can vicariously experience women experiencing sex-as-power as freeing and positive when they watch reality TV. The viewers may figure they will reap similar positive feedback if they behave in similar ways.

Social Cognitive Theory also suggests that viewers are more likely to model behavior that results in positive outcomes rather than behavior that is unrewarded or is sanctioned in some way, and will be more motivated to adopt behaviors of those they perceive as similar and as attractive. Thus, Social Cognitive Theory would predict that young women who frequently view sex-as-power reality TV, will begin to incorporate behaviors that focus primarily on sexuality and body as a means to get attention, monetary rewards, or to feel powerful, just as the characters they observe in the TV shows do.

The Application phase of media practice speaks to the ways in which young women incorporate media into their daily lives as well as the ways in which they are resistant to its messages. It is important to think about the ways in which young women are able to exercise a critical perspective of, or resist, sexualized media content. For the purpose of this study, the focus will be on if and how young women think critically about their viewing experiences. Do they understand and can they articulate why they like or dislike certain genres? Do they relate their preferences to moral and/or intellectual reference points?

The idea that young women engage in an active way during media consumption is widely supported (Harris, 2005; Lemish, 2003; Mazzarella, 2005). The development of a critical perspective is often discussed in relation to interpretive resistance. A critical perspective is influenced by knowledge of the ways in which images circulate through
culture and the underlying meanings, assumptions, and subjectivities expressed. Livingstone (2007) speaks of a critical perspective in terms of how audiences alter dominant messages, suggesting that audiences are capable of using a text and making it their own. The tension between the amount of critical space an audience member might or might not possess and the power of the text has been a continuing tension in feminist media research (Ang, 1987; Brown, 1994; Radway, 1987). The underlying question for many feminist researchers, and central to my own study, is not whether a critical perspective is possible, but how it occurs, what social constructions limit or block its occurrence, and what this means for the young women who grow up in this sexualized environment. These are some of the issues that are addressed in this study.

**Summary**

As the media continue to present sexualized portrayals of women, it is important to creatively scrutinize and address the ways in which young women respond. Dow (1990) suggests that “the subtle manifestations of hegemony in television” must be studied through audience-centered research as well as with critical insight (p. 272). In relation to this study, the MPM suggests that women will be doing a substantial amount of identity work that will influence the selection, interaction, and application processes associated with reality TV and specifically sex-as-power imagery. Addressing the four elements of media practice (i.e., identity, selection, interaction, and application) allows for a comprehensive look at the process of seeking out, enjoying, and incorporating popular and controversial subject matter.

The focus on identity speaks to women’s notions of self and the ways in which they conceive of what it means to be a woman in this society, and specific to this study, what the women feel is empowering about the sex-as-power imagery. The selection process builds on
that, in that it addresses (through uses and gratifications) the reasons why women seek out reality shows that focus heavily on sex-as-power imagery. What gratifications do women seek to fulfill when they choose to watch reality TV programming that heavily focuses on sex-as-power imagery and what leads to enjoyment of such shows? The selection process is not separate from a woman’s identity but intrinsic to it. The interaction process, or how female viewers make meaning from what they see on reality TV, is also intrinsic to identity and identity development as well as to the process of selecting media to consume. Finally, the application process brings the model full circle, focusing on how women with distinct identities select, experience, and then apply or use sex-as-power imagery through the cultivation of certain beliefs, values, and assumptions or through the modeling of behaviors they see on these shows. Thus, the Media Practice Model provides a valuable framework for an in-depth look at how women, based on their own identity constructs, select, interact with, and apply (or resist) the media they consume.

**Goals of This Study**

The goal of this project was to conduct audience-centered research that explored the ways in which women from a range of age groups negotiate meaning when faced with overt sex-as-power images on reality TV. The primary research question was: How do women respond to sexual content on reality television? The subsidiary questions were: In what ways do women make sense of the formulations of power and agency articulated through the discourses on reality TV? Do they categorize the sexual content on reality TV as celebratory of women’s freedom and choice? Do they see it as empowering and positive – a site of self-expression, identity-creation, resistance and enjoyment? Or do they find it exclusionary and inauthentic, ultimately a source of anxiety?
By exploring the ways in which contemporary women of different ages interpret sexualized images of women, this study aimed for a better understanding of the gender identity issues that confront young women in the new century. The study focused on the ways in which women are responding to competing discourses about what it is to be a woman in popular culture.
CHAPTER 4
METHODS

Focus groups with women from three age groups, or cohorts, were conducted to gain a better understanding of how women negotiate meaning when watching reality TV programs that focus heavily on sex-as-power imagery. Sex-as-power imagery is conceptualized as women using overt sexuality to get ahead in their careers, to attain monetary rewards, to express power, and to gain other types of rewards such as attention or love. The goal of this research was not to generalize to larger groups of women or to make broad claims about how all women internalize or are affected by this type of imagery. The goal was to address the contradictory discourses of femininity, sexuality, and agency that are offered to women and to explore how women across generations respond to this imagery. Focusing on their experiences, stories, and articulations allowed for a more contextualized understanding of the lived experiences of women as they navigate the often contradictory nature of popular culture’s messages about femininity and what it means to be a powerful woman.

Participants

Thirty-eight women from three different generational cohorts were recruited to participate in this study. The first age cohort, referred to throughout the study as the “young cohort,” “younger women,” or “young women” was made up of college-aged women ranging from first year students to seniors. The seven focus groups were divided by age into groups
of 18- to 19-year-olds and groups of 20- to 22-year-olds. The younger women were recruited using the snowball method and were all first-year students from eight different Southeastern universities. The older college students were recruited from a university research pool. The cohort included three African American women, two Asian American women, one Latina, and 22 white women.

The seven focus groups for the younger cohort were conducted with a range of one to nine women in each group. Thirteen of the 28 women self-identified as feminist, while the other 15 stated that they do not consider themselves feminist. Seven of the 28 women had taken a women’s studies or gender studies course. Two of the heavy viewers, Jennifer, 20, and Heather, 18, were contacted via telephone for follow-up questions. Both young women were familiar with the shows used in the study and watched them on a regular basis. The demographic characteristics of the younger women are presented in Table 1.
Table 1: Demographic characteristics of young women (18-22 years) participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>TV Hours/Week</th>
<th>Reality TV Hours/Week</th>
<th>Women's Studies Courses?</th>
<th>Feminist?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Addie</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jes</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heather*</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erika</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clara</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piper</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisa</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andy</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Char</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jo</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellen</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer*</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eve</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kris</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ariana</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carly</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ali</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewel</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maya</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lena</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joselyn</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jill</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erin</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Participated in follow-up phone interview.

The second cohort, referred to as the “middle age cohort” or “middle age women” was made up of four women ranging in age from 28- to 36-years-old. This cohort was recruited using the snowball method. The middle age cohort included four white women,
including a single working woman who did not attend college, two stay-at-home mothers who both had college degrees, and one working mother with a college degree. The women from the middle age cohort were well out of college and had established careers or were stay-at-home mothers with two or more children.

I met with this group for one two-hour session and conducted a one-hour follow-up interview with Marty, 28, a stay-at-home mother of three. Marty watched and enjoyed reality TV, including two of the shows used for this study. None of the women self-identified as being feminist and two of the women had taken women’s studies or gender studies courses. The group as a whole was made up of avid TV watchers and three out of the four women identified reality TV as one of their favorite genres. The demographic characteristics of the middle age women are presented in Table 2.

### Table 2: Demographic characteristics of middle age women (28 – 36 years) participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>TV/Week</th>
<th>Reality TV/Week</th>
<th>Women's Studies Courses?</th>
<th>Feminist?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marty*</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Blank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karina</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Blank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penny</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Participated in follow-up phone interview.

The third cohort, 45- to 56-year-olds, was comprised of six upper-class white women who were stay-at-home mothers and grandmothers or working women with grown children. This group is referred to as the “older cohort” or “older women,” and was recruited using the snowball method. Two of the six women self-identified as feminist and one of the women had taken a gender studies or women’s studies course. It was not a surprise that this group of
women watched fewer hours of reality TV than any other group. There was, however, one woman, Sara, 56, who watched reality TV on a regular basis and was familiar with the shows used in this study. Sara spent an additional hour talking about her experiences with these particular shows in a one-on-one phone interview. The demographic characteristics of the older women are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: **Demographic characteristics of older women (45 – 56 years) participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>TV Hours/Week</th>
<th>Reality TV Hours/Week</th>
<th>Women's Studies Courses?</th>
<th>Feminist?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mel</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becky</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cindy</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nan</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara*</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Participated in follow-up phone interview.

The majority of the 38 women who agreed to participate in the focus groups represent the target demographic group for the reality shows of interest, 18- to 34-year-olds. The older cohort, who did not fit that demographic, was included to see how women across generations and who did not grow up in a culture of overt sexuality responded to the representation of overt sex-as-power imagery.

Based on past experience with focus groups and group discussions, I felt that a sample size of at least 30 would ensure sufficient theoretical saturation. Theoretical saturation, according to Strauss & Corbin (1998) occurs when: (1) no new or relevant data seem to emerge regarding a category; (2) the category is well developed in terms of its
properties and dimensions demonstrating variation; and (3) the relationships among
categories are well established and validated.

The recruitment process resulted in a mix of women who did and did not watch
reality TV. During the recruitment process, I did not target self-identified reality TV viewers.
The reason for this is that many women would say that they do not watch reality TV or do
not like reality TV when they do in fact watch reality TV shows. This assumption was
verified by the women in the focus groups. A number of women who expressed disdain for
reality TV and claimed to avoid it knew details from the shows used in the study as well as
information about the women portrayed on the shows. To obtain a deeper understanding of
this phenomenon, I wanted the perspective of women who do not necessarily enjoy or watch
reality TV.

One woman from each age group was also contacted via telephone for follow-up
questions after the initial coding. The person selected for follow-up questions was an avid
reality TV watcher and enjoyed the shows used in this study (or similar others). This type of
sampling is referred to by Strauss and Corbin (2008) as “theoretical sampling,” where the
purpose is to “collect data from places, people, events that will maximize opportunities to
develop concepts in terms of their properties and dimensions, uncover variations, and
identify relationships between concepts” (p. 143). This allowed for greater development of
the categories that were prominent in the original focus group data. I was able to ask follow
up questions and have these women explain things more thoroughly and in ways that were
relevant to the initial findings, codes, and relationships between codes.
Focus Groups

The focus groups took place over a four-week period. I facilitated the sessions and recorded each session with a digital voice recorder. The meetings lasted approximately two hours each. A set of interview questions were used to guide each session. The structure of the interview sessions followed Krueger and Casey’s (2000) pattern for introducing the group discussion: the welcome, overview of the topic, ground rules, and the initial questions. An initial open-ended questionnaire was used to verify the women’s age, their specific television viewing habits and practices, and their general feelings toward reality TV. After the women filled out the consent form, they were given a short list of open-ended questions. These questions included:

- How old are you?
- Where is your hometown?
- On average, how much TV do you watch per week?
- How much reality TV do you watch per week?
- What shows do you watch regularly?
- What do you like/dislike about reality TV?

In the consent form, the women were advised that they could use a fictitious name if they felt uncomfortable using their own name.

Stimuli. Following the initial open-ended questions, three clips from a range of popular reality TV programs were shown to the women. Each clip lasted an average of 15 minutes and was taken from recent episodes of the selected shows. Clips were shown back-to-back and varied in the order in which they appeared for each interview session. The reality TV shows used in this study are presented in Figure 2.
The three shows were selected because they portray women of different age groups, represent the diversity of the sexualized reality TV genre, and were popular with the 18- to 34-year-old female demographic at the time. These reality TV shows fall into the category of the sex-as-power subgenre of reality TV as defined for this study. Shows that fall into this category often feature young women who borrow elements from pornography for their self-presentation, representing what McRobbie (2004) described as the “pornification” of mainstream media. Each show, often explicitly, suggests that a sex-as-power persona is an enjoyable and often lucrative aspect of the modern woman’s life, one that should be embraced and utilized. Each show also portrayed women using their sexuality to gain monetary rewards, attention, and success in their lives.
The Girls Next Door was a show about three young women who explicitly use their sexuality to get ahead in life and wield power and success. It chronicled the life and fun times of Hugh Hefner’s girlfriends who lived at the Playboy Mansion. The highly popular show, which debuted on August 7, 2005, enjoyed success through five seasons, resulted in three spin-offs (Kendra, Holly’s World, and The Girls Next Door: Bunny House), and attracted a primarily female audience within the 18- to-34-year-old demographic (Becker, 2005; 2006). The show scored a 1.06 Nielsen television rating during its debut in 2005, which translates into close to 1.2 million viewing households (Grossman, 2005). That first season, the show averaged about 800,000 viewers per episode, twice the typical number of viewers the E! Network attracted during summer prime time (Becker, 2005). The premiere of the show’s second season earned the network’s highest series rating, with a 1.45 household rating and 1.63 million viewers and then topped itself by having 2.16 million viewers for the third season premiere (Becker, 2006). The final episode staring the original three women was watched by 2.5 million viewers.

A clip from the episode entitled Career Dazed was selected to show the focus groups. This episode followed Hef’s girlfriends Kendra, Holly, and Bridget as they pursued new opportunities after the success of their first Playboy pictorial. Throughout the clip, the girls discussed the benefits of being a Playboy bunny and are portrayed enjoying these perks. Bridget gets a new Porsche. Holly gets to direct a Playboy pictorial. Kendra gets to meet famous athletes. At the end of the clip, Kendra stated: “Being in Playboy has definitely changed my life because I get to meet the people I want to meet and they all know who I am, and it’s like the best feeling in the world.” This clip was selected because it is a good example of women using their sexuality to further their careers and to gain benefits.
Keeping Up with the Kardashians represented another popular show for the E! Network, a network that prides itself on creating programming that successfully targets female viewers. Keeping Up with the Kardashians debuted on the E! Network on October 14, 2007, and documented the daily lives of the Kardashian/Jenner family, focusing on the three oldest daughters: Kim, Khloe, and Kourtney. Since its premiere in 2007, the show has been the highest-rated series on Sunday nights among women 18- to-34-years-old for the E! Network. An average episode receives around a 1.06 rating among adults and a 1.7 among women 18- to-34-years-old, according to Nielsen Media Research. Keeping Up with the Kardashians reached more than 13 million total viewers in its first month on air. Now well into its sixth season and with two spin-offs (Kourtney and Kim Take New York and Khloe and Lamar), the show represented one of the many popular reality shows focusing on the lives of young women and their personal and career choices. This show was selected because it portrays women who have what they consider to be successful careers and who unabashedly use their sexuality to gain success.

The clip selected for this study followed Kim Kardashian as she decided whether or not to pose for an anniversary edition of Playboy. The clip began with Kim receiving a call from Hugh Hefner encouraging her to pose for his December cover. Kim, who expressed concern about the fall-out from her sex tape that was released in 2006, was not sure if Playboy was a good career move. Kim turned to her family for advice and everyone agreed that she should pose except her step-dad, Bruce Jenner. Kim decided to do the cover as long as she did not have to get completely naked but with a little encouragement from Hugh Hefner, Kim decided to pose naked and explained that as long as she was covered in diamonds and pearls then she was comfortable being naked. Her mother, Kris, watched the
shoot and told her, “Sweetie, you’re doing amazing. These are beautiful. These are so hot.”

The clip ended with Kim discussing her experience: “Posing for Playboy was a huge challenge for me. I’m so extremely happy I did it. Hef and his whole team were so gracious and welcoming. I can’t wait to see it.”

*My Super Sweet 16*, a show that targets a somewhat younger demographic, is a successful MTV reality series documenting the lives of wealthy teenagers planning and celebrating their upcoming birthday parties. Celebrations include the quinceanera (the 15th birthday party for Latinas), the sweet 16, and other birthdays including a *My Super Sweet 21*. Premiering on January 18, 2005, the show features adolescents who are more often than not spoiled, materialistic, demanding, temperamental, and ungrateful. They are also predominantly female. The episode used for my study showed a young woman who openly discussed how she used her sexuality to get what she wants out of life, especially to gain attention.

This particular clip from MTV’s *My Super Sweet 16* featured Lacey, a small-town girl from Ohio, who was having a birthday bash. Prior to her party, she flew down to Florida for a photo shoot were she was photographed in a wide array of tiny bikinis with male models and snakes wrapped around her exposed body. The images were eerily reminiscent of Britney Spears’ 2001 performance at the MTV music awards where she performed “I’m a slave for you” with a giant albino python wrapped around her body. The pictures were taken so they could be displayed life-sized at Lacey’s 16th birthday party. The focus of the party was Lacey displaying her sexuality and using it to gain attention from her peers.

These three shows are representative of the type of sexual imagery that is the focus of this study – overt sex-as-power imagery. The three shows were currently on the air or in
production for next season at the time of the focus groups and enjoyed success for at least four years, some much longer. The three shows fit into the definition of reality TV established in the literature review of this study, which includes: “programs that film real people as they live out events in their lives, contrived or otherwise, as they occur” (Nabi et al., 2003, p. 304). Each of the three shows portrayed women being themselves, are filmed in the women’s living or working environment (rather than on a set), do not follow a script, follow a narrative or storyline, and are filmed for the primary purpose of viewer entertainment (Nabi et al., 2003).

**Focus Groups Protocol.** After viewing the clips, the young women were asked to say their name, age, and grade in school (if applicable). Next, the young women were asked three general questions: (1) Have you seen the shows before? (2) Do you watch any of the shows on a regular basis? (3) What do you think about the shows, the characters, and the premise of the shows? The initial questions were used to start the discussion, which was then guided by other broad questions dealing with the show and the show’s characters, as well as the comments made by the women taking part in the study. These general questions guided the interviews:

- How would you describe the women portrayed on the shows?
- If you watch these shows, what do you like about them? What do you dislike?
- Describe how you watch the shows? Alone or in groups?
- If you had to describe these shows, what would you say?
- If you dislike the show or shows like this, please explain why.
- Why do you think these shows are popular with women?
- What do you think these shows are about?
- Do you think the shows portray real life for these women? Why or why not?
- Could you see yourself being friends with any of these women? Why or why not?
- Why do you think women like watching these shows?
- Why do you like watching the shows?
- Do any of the women stand out to you? For what reasons?
- What do you like/dislike about the women on the shows?
At the close of each focus group, the women were asked to answer a few additional written questions:

- How would you define an empowered woman?
- Have you ever taken any women’s studies or gender studies courses?
- Do you consider yourself a feminist? Why or why not?
- Is it OK to contact you via email for follow-up questions to the study?
- Would you be willing to participate in additional interview sessions?

These questions were asked on paper rather than as a group to make sure the women were not influenced by other’s opinions or stances and were able to express privately their own feelings about feminism and empowerment.

The University of North Carolina Institutional Review Board approved the research protocol for this study.

**Analysis**

The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using a modified grounded theory approach. Grounded theory, as described by Strauss and Corbin, (1998) is “theory derived from the data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process” (p. 12). The emerging theory is grounded in the experiences and views of the women who participated and speaks to the interaction between female audiences and sexualized imagery of women on reality TV. Rather than the deductive forms that are generally found in quantitative research, the first step of this analysis was to use “pattern theory” where the emphasis was on finding “interconnected set of concepts and relationships” (Neuman, 1991, p. 38).

The qualitative software package Atlas.ti was used to code the data. Atlas allowed me to organize the data into coding schemes, find interrelated patterns within those coding schemes, search the text, add hyperlinks connecting passages within the data, and add
comments and notations throughout the process. The note-taking tool provided a place to be candid about possible influences on the data and my analysis and served as a reminder that my role as a researcher was not neutral (Lewins & Silver, 2007). This feature provided a helpful audit capability that allowed me to come back to see the log of the analytic leaps that occurred during coding. This process added to the inference quality, or the “accuracy with which the researchers draw inductive and deductive conclusions from a study” (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003, p. 155).

**Reflexivity**

Reality TV was chosen because of the genre’s popularity with women, its pseudo presentation of reality, and its focus on female self-sexualization. As a woman in my thirties, the shows attracted my attention because so many of the women I knew, both young and old, watched and enjoyed the shows. I began to wonder if the women who enjoyed the shows also supported the sex-as-power message; that is, women should actively embrace their sexuality as a form of power and by actively making this “choice” they are empowered.

The more I watched the various reality TV shows relying on this script, the more concerned I was for how similar the images were and how enticing the lifestyles were made to seem. As a feminist and media scholar, the messages the shows promoted seemed inherently flawed but there was no denying the shows’ popularity with women, especially younger audiences. I was curious to see how women across generations negotiated meaning and the degree to which they supported the postfeminist (Gill, 2007) and neoliberal (Harris, 2004) rhetoric that informs the sex-as-power representations of women. I wanted to know what the ramifications are for younger generations of women who have grown up with reality
TV and increasingly sexualized representations of women. I also thought it important to see if even older women were affected by the portrayals as well.

I was aware of my own role and contribution in the construction of meaning throughout the research process. Feminist researchers suggest that “Personal experiences can be a valuable asset for feminist research” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 258). My own experiences growing up as a woman in a mediated environment, as well as my background in media research and gender studies certainly influenced my understanding of the women’s responses. We also shared some experiences of social location – as women and as audiences – that influenced my understanding, analysis, and explanation of the data.

With the understanding that it is impossible to position myself as an objective bystander outside of the research, I kept notes in Atlas and explored the ways in which my own involvement, history, beliefs, feelings, and expectations influenced and informed my research and my findings. From the research questions I asked to the women I recruited, my values, experiences, interests, and social identity were relevant and influential. Throughout the designing, gathering, coding, and analysis of my research, I incorporated “personal reflexivity,” a reflection of how my own beliefs, values, and interests impacted my research, and “epistemological reflexivity,” a reflection of how my research questions, research design, and presentation of data influenced my findings (Willig, 2001, p. 10).

In Atlas, I used memos and notes to document these two types of reflexivity as I conducted, transcribed, analyzed, and reported the data. I also used the practice of data checks during the interview process to help alleviate possible miscommunications or misinterpretations. In instances where the women used descriptors or terms to explain
something, I had them define those terms and explain them in their own words rather than infer meaning based on my own understanding of certain terms.

There is also a structure of power inherent in the interview process and in the production of research. As a white, middle class, adult, female academic, I was aware of the possibility that the women, particularly the younger women, would worry about being judged for their responses or that their answers might be considered right or wrong. Being aware of this power dynamic I made every effort to establish openness and honesty throughout the interview process.

After gathering and transcribing the data, I used an inductive approach for coding the data. The inductive process allowed for a unique “analysis of the relationships between data and categories” identified during the coding process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The inductive process was used to avoid allowing existing theoretical concepts to drive the analysis. According to Abrahamson (1983) “an inductive approach begins with the researchers immersing themselves in the documents in order to identify the dimensions or themes that seem meaningful to the producers of each message” (p. 286).

Coding

Following the recommendations of Creswell (2003), the first step was the “open-coding” of the transcripts, followed by an analysis to uncover common themes, and then followed by the development of initial categories from recurring patterns in the data (p. 192). The coding at this level was deeply grounded in the data and began to represent theoretical or analytical concepts as well as solely descriptive categories. The type of coding that was used throughout the initial data analysis phase, included but was not limited to: themes or topics, ideas or concepts, and language or terminology used in the data (termed *in vivo* coding).
In the second step, data were “selectively coded,” collapsing the initial categories into a reduced number of core categories. This process is known as axial coding. Coding categories, labels, and the data attached to them were revisited and analyzed in terms of similarities and difference. Similar codes were collapsed or grouped together or if needed they were split into more detailed codes. According to Lewins and Silver (2007) “Axial coding brings back together the fragmented data segments identified in the open coding phase by exploring the relationships identified between the codes which represents them” (p. 85). The third and final stage of the coding process was selective coding. The data and codes were reconsidered and the “most pertinently illustrated themes, concepts, and relationships” were identified (Lewins & Silver, 2007, p. 85). During this phase conclusions were revisited and reinforced with examples from the data. This process was used to highlight the excerpts that were used in the final writing and to make decisions about the segments of data that best illustrated the key findings.

Atlas was used to organize the entire coding process from start to finish. Atlas did not do the coding for me, but it provided a space that facilitated the development of a detailed understanding of the data and the phenomena the data represented. The coding process continued until there were no longer surprises in the data and the coding categories were extensively exhausted and merged appropriately. In other words, the material was coded into categories until all concepts were coded appropriately and accounted for.

After transcription, all names were changed to protect the identity of the women who participated and pseudonyms were used in the report of findings and in all tables.

Schneider and Gould (1987) suggested that the best way to study female sexuality is to focus on what women have to say about their own experiences, arguing that “sexuality can
be the terrain of both oppressive inequality and creative struggles toward women’s eventual freedom” (p. 135). The following chapters present the findings and are organized in relation to the Media Practice Model, focusing first on the women’s identity constructs and self-concepts, then on selection (i.e., media diet), then their interaction with the text, and, finally, application to their lives.

The dominant themes, which emerged during the focus group discussions, are discussed in-depth. Although the facets of the Media Practice Model are presented in a linear fashion, the model is more of a circuit, not a sequential process. Each element of the Media Practice Model is inextricably tied up with each of the others; however, they are separated here in order to allow us to focus on particular moments within the model.

First, elements of the women’s identity were explored, including their identification, or lack thereof, with feminism (i.e., do they self-identify as feminist) and their personal definitions of female empowerment. These aspects of the women’s identities were explored through open-ended written questions. This allowed for a more candid response in light of the group setting. Three dominant identity themes emerged across age groups, included motherhood, self-definitions of beauty and what it means to be sexy, and personal definitions of values, morals, and standards.

Next, the ways in which the women go about selecting this particular type of show, i.e., their media diets, are examined. Gratification seeking, including relaxation and escape and the social nature of watching, are discussed in-depth. Third, the ways in which the women interact with the text and make meaning is addressed. Specifically, aspects of enjoyment are examined to gain a better understanding of why these types of shows are so popular with female audiences. Finally, the ways in which the women applied the texts to
their own lives is discussed. Third-person effects, social comparisons, and pressures to conform emerged from the discussions.

Throughout the findings chapters I address the research questions: What factors allow some women to seek out and enjoy this type of portrayal while it causes anxiety for others? How does age play into the different responses and the ways in which women make sense of what they see on these shows, as well as how they apply it to their lives?
CHAPTER 5
IDENTITY

The women who participated in this study included a wide range of ages, with the youngest being 18 and the oldest 56. Two of the women from the older cohort self-identified as “retired homemakers,” meaning they had previously stayed at home with their children who were now grown and out of the house. One of the women, Mel, 45, had high school and middle school children who were still at home and at the time of the interview was a self-identified “stay-at-home mom.” Three of the women worked outside of their homes and had grown children. Two of the five women had a college degree, one had completed a few years of college, and two did not go to college because they started families instead.

In the middle age cohort, three of the women were mothers and one was a single, working woman. Of the three mothers, two were stay-at-home mothers and one was a full-time working mother. The three women who stayed at home with their children had college degrees but did not plan on returning to work until their children were out of the house, if at all. Sam, 35, who was single at the time of the interviews, did not have a college degree and was in no hurry to settle down, get married, or have children.

The women from the younger cohort were all college students, ranging from first year students to seniors. Almost half (13) of the 28 young women were in sororities and three were college athletes. Although none of the young women were married or had children they talked about their futures as wives and mothers.
The women were asked about feminist identity and personal definitions of female empowerment directly, in open-ended written questions.

**Feminist Identity**

At the end of each focus group, the women were asked to write responses to the question, “Do you consider yourself a feminist?” They were also asked to explain why they did or did not identify with the term “feminist” and what feminism meant to them. The question was not asked to determine the theoretical or philosophical approach that might be implied in an individual’s perspective. Instead, the purpose of the question was to determine if these women affirmatively claimed a feminist identity, i.e., “I am a feminist,” and therefore focusing specifically on this facet of their identity or internal self-perception. The word feminist is somewhat loaded, however, it was important to establish the degree to which the women accepted or rejected a feminist identity and for what reasons. This particular facet of self-definition guides how women make sense of experiences, such as the shows they come into contact with that contain overt sex-as-power imagery.

Since studies suggest that many women might not adopt the feminist label even though there might be a strong belief in feminist goals (Astin & Leland, 1991; Bushman & Lenart, 1996), it was important to address the reasons why these women did or did not identify with feminism. Additionally, studies have shown that for many women, the adoption of feminist beliefs and a feminist identity often comes later in life (Astin & Leland, 1991). This is relevant as the focus groups included women ranging in age from 18- to- 56-years-old.

We might expect that women who self-identified as feminist would have more of a problem with this type of portrayal, but that did not prove to be the case. Of the 38 women...
included in the focus groups, 15 responded that they considered themselves feminist and 21 said they did not.¹ Three main themes emerged: “I am not a feminist because of traditional values that do not coincide with feminism;” “I am not a feminist because of postfeminist ideals, i.e., I do not see a need for feminism;” and “I am a feminist and I support feminist ideals and beliefs.”

**Traditional Values**

“I’m not a feminist because I like being a woman.”

Traditional values were most often discussed by the women who did not self-identify as feminist. For these women, there was a conflict between traditional beliefs and values and the beliefs these women felt were closely associated with feminism. Surprisingly, this did not vary by age. Many of the youngest and the oldest women responded similarly. For example, Addie, 18, wrote: “I don’t consider myself a feminist because I don’t think women have to prove or be equal to men. Men and women were created different, that’s the way it’s always been, and that’s not bad.” Another one of the younger women, Ellen, 20, agreed. She wrote: “I do not feel threatened by any sort of inequality that may exist between men and women. It’s just the way things are. I don’t think staying at home to raise a family or run a house is degrading.”

April, 20, focused on difference: “No, I’m not a feminist because even though I do think men and women are unequal in some ways, some tasks are just better performed by men. That’s their role.” Heather, 18, wrote: “I generally associate feminism with thinking females are better than men and I’m more of an equality/co-exist men and women kind of person. They both have certain things to bring to the table and they’re different types of

¹Two women did not answer the yes or no part and instead just gave a description of their beliefs regarding the issue.
things.” The idea that women and men fill specific and different roles was a prevalent theme in the responses. Other research suggests similarly that traditional gender roles remain ingrained in practice and ideology (Gerstel & Sarkisian, 2006).

The women in the middle age cohort were split on whether or not they identified as feminist. Penny, 36, wrote: “It’s nice that there are differences in men and women. It is how it’s always been and, in my opinion, should be.” Similarly, Becky, 48, wrote, “I’m not a feminist. I am confident that women have as much to offer as men but I am still old school – I still believe in traditional values and roles.” Nan, 56, wrote, “I am not a feminist because I like being a woman. I like when a man opens the door for me and allows me to be feminine.” Mel, 45, a stay-at-home mother, agreed, “I do like the special treatment that men don’t get – the chivalry.”

A rejection of the heavily loaded term ‘feminist’ may not be surprising, but the women’s reasoning for not identifying as feminist is. Going into this project, I would have expected many of the women to reject the term ‘feminist’ but to do so while still embracing the need for equality and women’s rights, i.e., “I’m not a feminist, but…. ” These women, however, focused on enjoying traditional roles and differential treatment, and never mentioned existing inequalities.

Wallis (1998) suggested that such perspectives might be because “Feminine clothing is back, breasts are back, motherhood is popular again. To the young, the movement that loudly rejected female stereotypes seems hopelessly dated” (p. 84). But, among the women in this study, age did not seem to matter -- support for gender role differences was a common theme regardless of age. Steinem (1983) suggested that young women’s idealized acceptance of equality is often the result of their environment, such that “as students women are treated
with more equality than they ever will be again” and that they’ve yet to encounter “radicalizing experiences, such as unequal pay, marriage, child care, and aging” (p. 212).

Many of the women in this study, however, regardless of age or current environment, were accepting of inequalities and even expressed a desire for traditional gender role differences.

**Postfeminist Ideals**

“No. I’m not a feminist. I feel empowered as a woman – proud, strong, and equal.”

A smaller group of the women did not self-identify as feminist because they did not see a need for the feminist movement in their lives. It was not that they enjoyed certain traditional roles or felt there were innate differences in men and women, it was more a feeling that men and women were equal and there is no longer a need for feminism. These women viewed feminism as a thing of the past, not relevant to their lives. Few of the women in this study brought up gender discrimination or unequal power relations in their response to the question regarding feminism. Instead, many of the younger women and a few of the older women focused on the opposite: the lack of barriers for modern women.

For example, Karina, 29, wrote: “I think women who are smart and confident are able to climb to the same heights as men if they work hard.” Ali, 21, wrote: “Women have equal rights to men. Women are given equal opportunity as men and it is up to them to prove themselves.”

This notion that feminism is a thing of the past and that individual women have it in their power to succeed was most common among the younger women. Only one of the older women expressed similar views. Similar to Jowett’s (2004) research, the responses from these women suggests that they have not personally experienced or seen gender discrimination, or believe that they will experience this type of discrimination when they get
older. Characterized by Budgeon and Currie (1995) as a type of “woman-centered individualism,” (34) this type of postfeminist mentality assumes that there is no longer a need for the women’s movement because oppressive institutions have successfully been ameliorated. Postfeminism rejects the notion that significant gender inequalities and exclusions continue to exist (Rockler, 2006).

**Self-Identified Feminists**

“Yes. I am a feminist. I’m all for women – women’s rights and equality.”

Fifteen of the 38 women self-identified as feminist. They claimed a feminist identity, an internal self-perception (feminist) combined with a connection to a social environment (women’s movement) (Purnell, 2006). Thirteen women from the young cohort answered “Yes” to the question “Do you consider yourself a feminist?” Two of the women in the older cohort answered yes to the question, while one of the women in the middle age cohort did not answer yes or no but her comments suggested that she did feel a need to advocate for women’s rights.

Jo, 20, focused on difference: “I think that women and men are very different but they should be treated equally.” Erin, 22, wrote: “I am a feminist because I think women deserve equal treatment and our society still has a lot of work to do to respect women as humans.” Mary, 20, agreed: “I support women’s rights and think all women should have equal opportunities in life to succeed.” Similarly, Joselyn, 21, wrote that she is “invested in making sure women are represented and able to act on their own agency and are treated equal.” The women who answered “Yes” openly claimed a feminist identity, supporting the idea that the feminist movement is still important. Some of their comments suggest an activist identity,
expressed through a desire to advocate for women around the world and take action to make the world a better place for women.

The two women in the older cohort who definitively claimed a feminist identity did so for similar reasons. Cindy, 48, wrote: “I do consider myself a feminist because we are all created equal as children of God - equal. Society should not label us with traditional male and female roles.” Similarly, Kelly, 52, wrote, “I am a feminist because I believe women should build on their inner strength to affect the world around them.”

Two women in the middle age cohort left the yes/no part of the question blank, suggesting an inability to commit to the term “feminist.” They did, however, describe their beliefs regarding the issue, with Marty, 28, writing, “I’m all for women – women’s equality. I think we should have equal rights. It’s important to me.”

The distinction between claiming and rejecting a feminist identity proved to be an interesting element in other phases of the Media Practice Model (selection, interaction, and application). We will return to some of those intersections as we discuss the other phases in the women’s media practice. The next element of identity addressed in the focus groups was the women’s personal definitions of empowerment.

**Definitions of Empowerment**

At the end of each focus group, the women were also asked “How would you describe an empowered woman?” The majority of the responses focused on three characteristics: confidence, control, and independence.

**Confidence.** All the women focused on confidence as a defining element of an empowered woman. The younger women focused on confidence as it relates to personal
morals and physical appearance. Most of the women from the two older cohorts focused more on how confidence is associated with personal accomplishments and success in life.

Andy, 19, wrote that an empowered woman is “someone who has her own morals, is successful, a role model to younger women and has the ability to change the way people act. She is confident enough to stand behind her morals and let everyone know how she feels.” Andy added that an empowered woman is confident because she is “smart, beautiful, and put together.” Similarly, Erika, 18, wrote that an empowered woman is “someone who has her own set of morals and can tell right from wrong. She is pretty but naturally pretty. She doesn’t feel the need to always wear makeup, etc., but she is confident enough to let who she is on the inside shine through.”

Heather, 18, wrote that an empowered woman has “strong moral and ethical standards, she is driven, kind, compassionate, mature, enjoys life, is well-put together, genuinely happy, mostly earning the respect of those around her and not falling victim to the pressures and expectations of those around her.”

Confidence was almost always associated with physical appearance for the youngest women in the focus groups. Jo, 21, wrote that an empowered woman “cares about what she looks like. She can look any way but she shows people that she cares about her appearance by the way she carries herself, her hygiene and her clothes.” Physical appearance was directly related to confidence suggesting that the younger women placed greater value on outer appearance as an element of power than the women from the two older cohorts. From many of the younger women’s perspectives, for a woman to feel powerful then she needs to look the part.
The women from the two older cohorts focused less on appearance than the younger women and more on confidence related to actions and personal success. Karina, 29, a working mother, felt that an empowered woman is “confident, self-assured, and successful,” and that “looks are not important to how she acts.” Kelly, 52, wrote, “An empowered woman is one who has the ability and confidence to be who she wants to be. She is successful, she enjoys life and she acts consistently, doesn’t waver.” Cindy, 48, wrote that an empowered woman is “self-confident, true to her values, educated by life, strong, and a woman of faith.”

The women who were out of college rarely discussed looks as being related to confidence or empowerment. This distinction is particularly interesting as the shows used for this study primarily feature women who gain success, wield power, and control through their looks.

**Control.** Control was also cited as a minor component of an empowered woman, although the women were not consistent in how this kind of control was described. Sara, 56, wrote that an empowered woman “is in control, has it together, and can make things happen,” while college student Char, 19, wrote that an empowered woman “controls things in her life in a non-aggressive way.” Elements in their discussions of control supported traditional gender roles, e.g., “She is in control but not too outspoken,” and “She is sensitive to others.”

Penny, 36, a stay-at-home mother, wrote:

An empowered woman would be defined by her success (of happiness) whether that be in the workforce or at home with her kids. The happier you are with yourself then the more empowered you should be. I think the empowered woman would act in control and in charge of everything she does.
Thus, it is clear that being in control is important to Penny, but it is also interesting to note her use of the word “act,” instead of just stating that an empowered woman must be in control. Many of the women included the word “act” in their definitions of empowerment. The word “act” suggests the women feel the image of empowerment is important, even when a woman might not believe she has power. For example, some of the women described empowerment as something a woman needs to “act” like she feels even if she is not in control of the situation. For some of the women, it seemed the image of power was just as important as having power.

**Independence.** The women in the younger cohort repeatedly used a discourse of individualism to describe an empowered woman. Rarely did these women see empowerment as anything but an individual goal. According to Rockler (2006) empowerment that focuses on individual accomplishments is commonly portrayed on television and perpetuates self-absorption and individualism among women, working to depoliticize women’s issues. According to, Eve, 21: “An empowered woman doesn’t rely on others for her success and is confident in her own actions.” Similarly, Jill, 22, said, “An empowered woman doesn’t depend on anyone else for much. She has made her own path in life and is successful on her own. She presents herself in an appropriate and appealing way to those around her.”

Others in the younger cohort suggested that an empowered woman would not be a “follower,” would not “allow others to get in her way,” and would not “rely on others to help her climb the ladder.” Marty, 28, said: “An empowered woman can do anything on her own, or nothing! As long as she is comfortable with her choices and makes them for the right reasons – her own!” Individualism was central to many of the younger women’s descriptions,
with a focus on women standing on their own, making decisions on their own, and gaining success and power on their own terms.

These types of responses, ones that focus on individualism and independence, were not especially surprising as the focus on individual development and finding a voice has evolved into the empowerment paradigm embraced by many young women (Carlip, 1995). This theme of individuality rang true for the younger women much more so than it did for the older women, however. Not one of the women over age 40 incorporated this type of individualism in her definition of empowerment. For the younger women, an empowered woman is someone who represents strength and independence, but all of these things are enacted through individual power.

The older women discussed empowerment in regards to self-concepts, like self-esteem, self-worth, and self-assurance; however, they did not directly refer to empowerment as an individual process. For example, Becky, 48, wrote that an empowered woman, “is not afraid to ask for help.” Similarly, Kelly, 52, wrote that an empowered woman “knows how to work with others to reach goals.” In contrast, many of the younger women focused on how women should be able to do things on their own and empowerment was often related to not relying on others.

Another element of identity that emerged during the interviews was motherhood. In contrast to the direct questions asked about feminist identity and personal definitions of an empowered woman, the women were not asked specific questions about their views on motherhood, but their perspectives emerged during the discussion of the shows. According to Buckingham (1993) “Talk about television serves to define the self in relation to others,” (p. 86) and helps shed light on personal identity constructs. The following sections draw from
the discussions of the reality shows and provide more insight into how the women make sense of their world and their roles within it.

**Motherhood**

Motherhood emerged as an important theme throughout the interviews and an integral element of identity for each cohort. According to Woodward (1996), “Motherhood is an identity which has an impact on us all since we all have or had a mother, even if only some of us become mothers” (p. 6).

For the two older cohorts, motherhood was a central facet of the women’s current identity constructs and affected their responses to the clips. The older cohorts viewed the clips through the lens of motherhood and responded as mothers and grandmothers. For many of the women in the older cohorts, motherhood dominated their personal and social identities. The women expressed clear expectations, beliefs, and roles associated with motherhood. Motherhood as a facet of their identity was tied directly to their beliefs about gender and what it means to be a woman.

For the younger cohort, motherhood emerged as a projection of how they thought they would feel once they were married and had children, specifically how they would explain the overt sexual displays to their hypothetical daughters. The younger women also referred back to their own mothers, discussing how their mothers would respond to the sexualized images and how they would feel knowing their daughters were watching shows containing this type of content. They also spoke about what they were taught by their mothers. Motherhood, as a facet of the younger women’s identities, was less salient and emerged less frequently compared to the women who were having children or had children.
For the young women who it did bring it up, their comments shed light on expectations of marriage and motherhood.

**Motherhood from the Older Women’s Perspectives, Age 28- to-56-years-old**

“As a mom, this type of thing just gets to me.”

The two older cohorts consistently directed the conversation back to their own children and grandchildren, focusing on how certain women, like the ones they viewed in the clips, made being a mother harder. The older women often started their sentences with comments about their roles as mothers and grandmothers. They stressed the importance of this role throughout the interviews, identifying the importance of being a “good mom,” i.e., a good woman. All of the women in the older cohorts worried that the type of women presented in the clips, [i.e., Kim, Bridget, Kendra, Holly, and Lacey] would undercut the lessons they felt were important to teach their daughters, their granddaughters, their nieces, and even their sons.

According to Marty, 28: “I just can’t help but think of my daughter when I watch this and when I think of her this type of thing is upsetting. I’m a mom and I want to protect her. That’s my job. I don’t want her to grow up feeling like she has to use her body to get things. That’s such a terrible message for young girls.”

Karina, 29, a working mother, said:

There’s no way to protect your children from this stuff and as a mother that’s so difficult. I want my daughter to feel confident in other things, like being smart and getting attention from that, not this stuff, but it’s everywhere. There’s no way to avoid it. Have you seen those dolls they’re selling these days? They might as well be posing for *Playboy* and those are directed at young girls. It’s the same stuff we see
these women like Kim doing and I worry my daughter will see this and think it’s acceptable. As a mom it’s really frustrating. How am I supposed to counter that?”

Mel worried about her daughter but also worried about what her son might learn from this type of portrayal. She asked: “What type of message does this send to my son? Women are objects. They should be seen and not heard and be naked? This goes against everything I’ve taught him. It’s something I don’t want him to learn. I don’t want him to view women this way. It makes my job as a mom harder.”

The women spoke of their ‘job’ as mothers and what types of expectations go along with this job. As women, they felt their primary responsibility was to protect and teach their children. The shows used in the study undercut the lessons they wanted to teach their children.

Nan, 56, said:

My granddaughters are still young but I worry about how my daughter will deal with this stuff when they start being exposed to it. I worry about them seeing all of this stuff, stuff we didn’t have to worry about when I was raising my daughter. It is so extreme now with the stripping and the sex. They’ll show anything on TV these days and as a mother, as a grandmother, you can’t help but worry.”

Some of the older women found it hard to separate being mothers and their job of raising their children from the media they consume. In other words, they viewed the shows through the lens of motherhood. This proved to be a source of anxiety for the women when they discussed the content of the clips. Some of the older women were still able to enjoy the shows. For others, the contradictions between the lessons they wanted to teach their children and the lessons presented on the shows were too great. The women from the two older
cohorts did not express concern for themselves; the focus of their concern was for younger women and primarily their own family members, as well as how they, as mothers, would counteract the messages portrayed in such shows.

**Motherhood from the Young Women’s Perspectives, Age 18- to-22-years-old**

“I’d like to be a mom one day and this stuff really worries me.”

For the young women, the theme of motherhood was not as central as it was to the women who had children and grandchildren. Many of the younger women brought up their futures as wives and mothers as well as the potential for the women from the clips (i.e. Kim, Lacey, Kendra, Holly, and Bridget) to one day become mothers themselves, and how motherhood might affect their futures. Some of the younger women felt anxiety about the messages the shows sent to young girls and the struggle they might have explaining this type of portrayal to their own hypothetical daughters.

According Clara, 19, “I want to be a mom and a wife one day so I just can’t imagine posing for *Playboy*. That would be embarrassing. It would always be out there. I think Kim will probably regret it one day when she wants to settle down and have children.” Similarly, Heather, 18, said, “I’m thinking these women might like to get married and maybe have children eventually and this just seems like it would come back and haunt them. The whole sex tape thing for Kim, posing for *Playboy*, she’s got all these things that she’s going to have a hard time explaining to her children. I just wouldn’t want to have to have that conversation with my daughter one day.”

The younger women worried about the women from the clips and their futures as mothers but they were also concerned about their own futures as mothers and how it would impact raising their children.
Joselyn, 21, said:

I want to have kids eventually and I think this type of thing will bother me even more then. It would be hard to explain it to my daughter, you know, why this isn’t a good thing. I just worry, I mean, what will be on TV then? It keeps getting worse. The strip poles and how cool Playboy is now and all the things women will do for attention. It isn’t even shocking anymore and it’s scary. What will things be like for our kids? I don’t even want to think about it.”

Andy, 19, also worried, saying, “I just can’t imagine how I would explain this to my daughter one day. It is so extreme and you’d think you wouldn’t have to worry but it really is everywhere so we’re completely desensitized to it and I hate that. I don’t want it to be OK, to be normal.”

Ariana, 20, said, “It is crazy these days and it seems to just keep getting worse. Sex tapes aren’t even a bad thing. It can actually be good for your career. What is going to be going on when we have kids? It’s going to be so hard to be a mom and handle this type of thing, especially if you have a daughter. It scares me to think about that.”

As a whole, the younger women focused less on motherhood than the older women who were having children or had already raised their children; however, it was still a dominant theme and one that came up in some regard for eighteen of the twenty-eight women in the younger group. The younger women’s responses suggest that motherhood and/or being a wife is an element of their identities that they count on in the future and they have clear-cut expectations for what marriage and motherhood entails. For many of the young women, the potential to have children and get married affected their response to the women from the reality shows, suggesting that as mothers they will have more responsibility
in protecting their children, specifically their daughters, from overtly sexualized content. They also have specific expectations as to what type of woman would make “good wife” material, and this did not include a woman who would pose for *Playboy* or use sex to get ahead in life. Overall, the younger women were not worried about the impact that sexualized images have on their own lives or for women as a group, but rather the potential impact it would have if they had children of their own and what it would mean to one day be a mother and a wife.

**Definitions of Sexy and Perceptions of Attractiveness**

Another dominant identity theme that emerged was the women’s personal definitions of beauty and what it means to be sexy. In the clips the women watched, possession of a sexy and attractive body was presented as a woman’s key (if not sole) source of identity. Because the women’s bodies were presented as their key source of power, their bodies required monitoring, discipline, remodeling, and consumer spending to conform to the narrow standards of female attractiveness promoted by reality TV. The similarities of the televised women’s physical appearance, including their bodies, hair, clothing, and makeup are evidence of the clear standard promoted in the media. The women’s bodies are constructed as a window on interior life, where “the sleek, controlled, toned figure is normatively essential for portraying success” (Lotz, 2001).

The women’s responses to the physical appearance of the women from the clips shed light on their personal definitions of beauty, what it means to be sexy, what is considered attractive, and how important they feel outer beauty and sexuality are to a woman’s identity. The body is, in Gauntlett’s (2002) words, “The outer expression of our self, to be improved, worked upon” (p. 104). The women’s responses to seeing the young women from the shows
present their bodies in such a sexualized manner sheds light on their own perceptions of what types of expressions are desirable and acceptable for women. The women’s responses to the shows and the characters were the vehicle for gaining insight into elements of their identity related to overt sex-as-power imagery and their own personal beliefs regarding what it means to be attractive and sexy.

According to Wolf (1992) “Today’s women have sexual identities that spiral around paper and celluloid phantoms: From *Playboy* to music videos to the blank torsos in women’s magazines, features obscured and eyes extinguished, they are being imprinted with a sexuality that is mass produced” (p. 162). By showing the women images of this type of mass produced sexuality and allowing them to respond, we gain a better understanding of the complexity of their internalized gender norms and how they relate to representations from a highly sexualized culture.

**Older Women**

“This new perception of sexy is a lot different than mine.”

The older women were far less forgiving of the images they viewed in the clips than any other age cohort. These women focused on the shocking nature of seeing the women from the clips expressing overtly sexualized personas, with comments such as, “I thought it was awful,” “I was completely shocked,” and “I just can’t believe it.”

Cindy, 48, responding to the *My Super Sweet 16* clip, said:

The fact that she [Lacey] saw herself as sexy is disappointing and that she was reaching her 16th birthday and that to her the celebration was to focus on sex and sell herself….her body. It would be nice to think that young women see themselves as more than sex objects. Clearly what was portrayed was just about sex and not about
the person that she is or that she could be. I just can’t imagine feeling that is important. Being sexy has never been that important to me. It’s not who I am or what I want people to think about when they look at me. There is so much more to all women other than being sexy. It’s sad that’s what she chose to focus on.

Words such as “disgusting,” “sad,” “disappointing,” “over-the-top,” “unbelievable,” and “shocking” were used repeatedly by the women in the older cohort to describe the women from the clips who used their sexuality as a primary source of power.

The older women’s self-definitions of beauty and sexuality were different from what they saw in the clips. Nan, 56, said, “You get older and this type of stuff just isn’t relevant anymore. You see it all the time but it’s not attainable. I guess it never really was attainable but it certainly isn’t now.”

Mel, 45, said:

Well, sexy is sexy and it’s not different for older women, which is bad for older women because five kids later you can’t look like that, but yet that’s still the mental image that most men have for women. Now, some are mature and realize women change and that really doesn’t matter but if my husband saw someone like that it would be hard for him to look away and that’s disappointing.

The central role of sexuality to the identity of the young women portrayed in the clips bothered the older women because it was so different from their own identity constructs. They did not like what they were seeing also because they felt pressure from the prevalence of these images, and were distressed that the reality TV women relied primarily on sex as an expression of their identities.
Kelly, 52, said:

It’s so sad that all Lacey thinks is good about herself is the sexy dressing up, the sexy persona. The short little dresses and the poses…it’s all that she sees as important and it’s what she wants people to see. What’s she going to be like in a couple of years? I just can’t imagine. For me, it’s just not that central. It’s not who I am as a woman. I guess it doesn’t define me. It defines these women. They almost don’t have anything else. That’s so sad to me.

Cindy, 48, expressed concern for Lacy, “It seems nothing is out of bounds. At the young age of 15. It was just over-the-top. I wondered where her parents were to stop her. Someone needs to tell her she is special and that being sexy is not what she needs to be focusing on. This is not what I would consider sexy. It’s way too public. I just don’t understand the need to put yourself on display like that.”

For the older women, the type of sexualization seen in the clips was foreign, not something they could relate to in their own lives. Nan, 56, said, “I just didn’t grow up with this kind of thing. It was Ozzie and Harriet and the Brady Bunch, and everyone kind of strived to be like them. Especially related to sex, it was Dick Van Dyke…they had twin beds, for crying out loud! This new perception of sexy is a lot different than mine.”

This “new perception of sexy” was connected to pornography by the women in the older age group who described the images as satisfying male desires. They described the images as “soft porn,” “basically porn,” “wearing as little as you can,” “no boundaries,” “all about big boobs,” “a man’s wet dream,” “trashy,” “exploitation,” and “artificial.” This “new perception of sexy” did not reflect their personal definitions of what it means to be sexy, i.e., that it should be a manifestation of affection and intimacy, and most importantly, something
private. Gill (2009) suggested that sexual pleasure is irrelevant in sexualized images of women in popular culture, rather it is “the power of sexual attractiveness that is important” (p. 105). The women from this group expressed a desire for a more natural presentation of sexuality that included varying body types and sizes and that was more “covered up,” “private,” and “personal.” The straightforwardness of the women’s sexuality bothered the older women.

Levy’s (2005) description of sexy, “… the inexplicable overlap of character and chemicals that happens between people,” (p. 80) is more in line with the older women’s definitions. The connection between two people, rather than an artificial persona, was central to this group’s definitions of feeling and being sexy. As Levy explained, “When I’m in the plastic “erotic” world of high, hard tits and long nails and incessant pole dancing—whether walking past a billboard of Jenna Jameson in Times Square, or dodging pillows at the Maxim Hot 100 – I don’t feel titillated or liberated or aroused. I feel bored, and kind of tense” (p. 81). The older women in this study also felt tense and uncomfortable with a presentation of sexy informed by pornography. They did not view it as liberating or desirable.

The older women also did not see the reality TV women as attractive. One thing that stood out for them was how one-dimensional the definitions of beauty were for women from reality TV, from the clothes they wore, to the makeup, to their hair color. The older women saw the reality TV women, especially the three women from The Girls Next Door, as trying to fit into a narrow standard of beauty, one that many of the women labeled “trashy” and “male-driven.” This conversation occurred after the older women watched The Girls Next Door clip:

Cindy: I think without all that trashiness then they probably are very attractive. What they wear and how they do that, it makes them look trashy. It takes away.
Nan: When they showed one of the girls with no makeup on she was very cute, very cute, but then she ruined it by putting all that crap on her face.

Cindy: I think all of the makeup is trashy. Although I know you have to wear a lot on TV but they go overboard. The outfits, their mannerism, when their nipples are hanging out. It’s just not attractive.

Sara: I think their hair is trashy and I think all three of them look trashy. There is no difference between them. They all look the same….trashy Barbie dolls.

The older women considered the standards of beauty presented in the clips exclusionary and unrealistic. The portrayals bothered them and caused anxiety, which was described with words such as “sad,” “awful,” “distressing,” and “upsetting.” It made them anxious about their own lack of desire to live up to such standards, the pressures it caused for their daughters and granddaughters, and the overall message that is being sent to all women about what it means to be attractive and powerful in today’s society.

The older women identified the pressure associated with trying to live up to unrealistic expectations but were adamant that personally they did not value this type of physical or sexual display. For example, Kelly, 52, said,

As a woman, I know there’s pressure to look a certain way and I do try to stay healthy and present myself in the best way possible, but there’s a fine line and I just don’t place that much value in outer appearance. Beauty is fleeting and character lasts. I’d rather have good character and have people get to know me for that than to walk around with no clothes on and flaunt my body. That’s just not something I’d be comfortable doing.

Other women from the older cohort also discussed popular culture’s expectations of women and how they deal with setting their own expectations when bombarded with such images. A few described the images from the clips as “unfair,” especially for older women.
because it places too much value on outer appearance and superficial aspects of a person’s identity.

**Middle Age Women**

“This type of sexy is produced...it just doesn’t seem authentic.”

The middle age women also expressed concern that the reality TV women made sexuality too central to their identities. The middle age women were concerned that it was not an honest representation of sexual identity, but was commercially driven and mass produced and therefore inauthentic. The women did not feel that Lacey, Kim or the three women from *The Girls Next Door* “owned” their sexuality. Instead, they saw this type of sexual identity as one that was driven by a desire to exploit and objectify women’s bodies for profit, and therefore was “sad,” “a shame,” “depressing,” and “distressing.” Although the women agreed that sexuality is a powerful tool, they were bothered that the women from the clips did not have control over their sexuality. This type of sexuality is in direct conflict to what Sam, 35, called “owned sexuality,” where women define their sexuality on their terms instead of creating it for the purpose of attracting attention or making money. Everyone in the group agreed that authentic sexuality is harder to possess when inundated with inauthentic or produced images such as the ones from the clips.

Some of the middle age women were at odds with sex as an important facet of self-expression, mainly because the majority of them were having babies, were raising small children, or were working full-time in demanding careers. In other words, they had very little time to focus on their appearance or even think about what it means to be sexy. The images of sexuality and power from shows like *Keeping Up With The Kardashians* and *The Girls Next Door* sparked conversations about sexual awareness and anxiety. Many of the women
from this group admitted to having some ambivalence regarding their own personal
definitions of sexy, citing the images they see in the media as the catalyst for these feelings
of confusion. At the time the focus groups took place, popular actress Jennifer Anniston had
just posed for *GQ* magazine in only a man’s necktie. In addition to the shows used in this
study, the women also referred to the *GQ* cover and expressed concern for the expectations it
sets for all women.

Marty, 28, said:

I don’t understand that. I mean, why did she [Jennifer Anniston] have to go on the
cover of a magazine naked? I mean obviously somewhat covered but it was still the
idea that it was Jennifer Anniston, but why did she have to go on the cover like that? I
don’t understand why Kim Kardashian or Jennifer Anniston or anyone needs to, I
mean when you get to that level, why do you then need to exploit yourself and show
yourself naked when that’s all it is….exploiting yourself? That’s the most important
thing? Really? I guess women feel this way. We’re pressured to feel this way.

The middle age women expressed concern that the reality TV women were not filling
an active, agentic subject position in relation to their sexuality, but, instead, were selling out
and unable to resist the pressures of the popular culture industry. All of the women
commented on the lack of diversity in the sexualized images prevalent in today’s popular
media. Again, the conversation was dominated by a desire for an authentic version of sexual
identity, one that was varied and more inclusive. Although this desire for authentic sexuality
was a dominant part of this group’s conversations, they were concerned that they were so
inundated with images from the media that it is hard to define their own version of authentic
female expression of sexuality.
Penny, 36, said: “We definitely live in a highly sexualized culture, it’s everywhere, but if you look at all the images we see then they all look very similar. All the covers, The Girls Next Door, they’re all doing the same poses. They have the same bodies, the same big platinum hair, massive boobs. It just seems so narrow. It’s all the same image and it’s EVERYWHERE.”

Karina, 29, also commented on the similarities: “It just leaves no room to celebrate any type of difference, any other bodies. It makes you feel like your body, after the babies and everything else, is so far from what is considered sexy or beautiful these days. As a woman, it’s kind of depressing. Of course I want to feel sexy but that…what we just watched…that’s just not going to happen. Nothing close to that is going to happen.”

Many of the women from the two older cohorts felt sorry for the reality TV women because they were so consumed with an unnatural type of beauty, and this was not something they could relate to. The two older cohorts placed greater value on inner beauty and a more natural and organic definition of sexuality, not one that was produced or manipulated for attention and money. The younger women were more divided in their responses to the images, and, overall, were more accepting than the older women of the reality TV portrayal of what is beautiful and sexy.

**Young Women**

“These women are definitely sexy…no doubt about that.”

As a whole, the young women were much more accepting of the images seen in the clips, specifically the central role of sex appeal. A few of the women were turned off by what they saw but the majority of the young women did not see any problem, labeling the reality TV women as “sexy,” “stunning,” “beautiful,” “boy-hot,” “exotic,” and “striking.” Their
responses provided insight into their own definitions of beauty and the role they feel sexuality should play in a woman’s identity.

In contrast to the two older cohorts, the young women did not make a clear distinction between inner and outer beauty. The young women viewed the maintenance of the perfect body, the perfect face, and the perfect hair as something women do for themselves, similar to pampering or spoiling oneself to increase feelings of self-worth and confidence. Even if they did not find the women from the clips attractive relative to their own definitions of beauty, the young women respected the reality TV women’s desire to maintain outer beauty as an important act of self-control and self-presentation.

As a group, the young women were more accepting than the older women of having a woman’s sexuality and physical characteristics define her identity. When asked what she thought of Kim Kardashian, Heather, 18, said:

I think she is a sex goddess! I think she’s very attractive in a sexual way. Her body….she’s curvaceously nice, I guess. I don’t know….that’s the only way I would describe her and that’s how she’s putting herself out there to be. I mean, that’s who she is, she’s Kim Kardashian, she’s posing naked in magazines, that’s what defines her is, like, her body. That’s who she is. It works for her.

Ellen, 20, said: “Kim is sexy and beautiful, and she’s feminine. She picks things that flatter her body and she knows how to use it. I love to see how she’s doing her hair and what shoes she’s wearing. She has a good sense of style.”

The young women endorsed the importance of maintaining a physically attractive body and did not see a problem in displaying the hard work it takes to achieve that type of body.
For example, Anna, 20, said:

I don’t think there’s anything wrong with showing off your figure, especially if you’ve worked hard for it. I exercise a lot and when I go out, that’s when I get to show it off. I’m going to show it off. Why else go to that trouble? I’m not getting the surgeries or anything like that but I think it’s important to do the things you can afford, like getting your hair or nails done, and presenting yourself the best way you can, being feminine, you know, being a girl. I do think that’s important. So do most girls I know. I put a lot into it.

Other young women also discussed the importance of maintenance, noting that the hard work that goes into maintaining beauty is part of being a woman and part of what it means to be feminine. According to Jo, 20: “It’s important to take care of yourself. It’s good for your confidence and it just makes me feel better. I love getting my nails done and things like that.”

Erin, 22, said: “It’s important to feel good about the way you look. It just makes me feel like I’m presenting myself in the best way possible. Unfortunately, as a woman the way you look does matter so you just have to take the time to take care of yourself.”

The young women, in contrast with the older women, were more accepting of the central role that a sexualized outer appearance played in the reality TV women’s identities. More of the younger women emphasized the importance of feminine looks and sexualized beauty, supporting the notion that sexual agency is primarily an aesthetic choice. Many of the younger women also felt pressure to maintain a certain type of body or image and categorized the work as a type of “pampering.” They seemed to accept this work (i.e., working out, getting their hair and/or nails done, dressing stylishly, etc.) as expected of them.
as women, and expressed pride in maintaining their outer beauty to enhance their femininity. Although they not did aspire to the same artificiality portrayed by the women from the clips (i.e., enhanced breasts, etc.), they agreed with the importance of maintaining physical beauty. Most of the maintenance activities they discussed required discipline, consumer spending, and self-regulation.

When asked if the young women felt the reality TV women were attractive, most of them agreed that they were attractive but in a sexualized way. In one of the focus groups, the young women discussed what they thought was attractive:

Kris: I think Kim is very pretty in the face. She’s more attractive than the average person and she works hard to maintain that. The same with Holly, Bridget, and Kendra. I can respect that, the work they do.

Mary: I think she portrays herself more as boy-hot than girl-hot. Like, boy-hot you exude sex more, I guess. She plays up her big butt. Then, girl-hot can be really classy and conservative. With girl hot, you pay more attention about being pretty in the face than having an attractive body. She’s definitely more boy-hot.

April: She has more sex appeal than being beautiful. That’s her thing.

Eve: I’d say she’s hot. I wouldn’t say she’s beautiful but she’s hot. That’s not a bad thing.

Jennifer: Yea, you wouldn’t describe her as being beautiful but you would describe her as sexy but you wouldn’t say, “Oh, she’s beautiful.” You’d say, “Oh, she’s sexy or she’s hot or she’s fine,” or something like that. She is made up…you know, she does a lot to look that way.
These young women, then, drew a definite distinction between natural beauty, which was something a woman was born with and being “hot,” which was a persona or image that was attained through consumption and work. Natural beauty was related more to a woman’s face, which was enhanced in a subtle or refined way, whereas being sexy or “boy-hot” was related specifically to the body and attained through more drastic measures, ranging from clothing and makeup selections, to tanning, all the way to plastic surgery. The reality TV women were all described as “artificially attractive,” and their sex appeal fell into the category described by Mary, 20, as “boy-hot.” Although many of the young women placed a premium on natural beauty, they also respected the work that went into maintaining sex appeal. Piper, 19, said: “I think she [Kim Kardashian] is really, really pretty but I don’t know anyone like her so I think that’s why there’s a kind of uniqueness in her. She’s sexy in an exotic way.”

There were a few young women, most of them 18- or 19-years-old, who were not as accepting of the central role sexuality played in the reality TV women’s lives. According to Char, 19, Bridget from The Girls Next Door is attractive but not something she aspires to: “I think she’s pretty but I think she’s really fake looking. She is kind of orange. You know, there are those people who are just pretty, just themselves, and then there’s women like her. Too much sex. Too fake.”

Jes, a first year student, agreed: “I think she was pretty but just way too much makeup. Definitely fake tans. I think a large part of why people find her attractive is because she gets naked. That’s not attractive to me.” The focus on sex appeal bothered some of the younger women because it was different from their own definitions of beauty. They did not
respect the women from the shows because they focused too heavily on what they considered an unnatural form of sex appeal.

**Conclusions re: Definitions of Sexy and Perceptions of Attractiveness**

Reality television, especially shows like the ones used in this study, works to reduce women to their faces, figures, clothes, and specific body parts. According to Douglas (2010) “If the beauty-industrial complex needed additional propaganda for its insistence that, without its arsenal of products you are never, ever good enough, reality TV shows totally fit the bill” (p. 199). The women from the focus groups all picked up on this assertion and discussed it in relation to their own feelings on what it means to be beautiful and to feel sexy. The older women were savvier in their assessment of how these depictions devalue women as individuals and as a group. The younger women, in contrast, embraced the focus on outer beauty, emphasizing the relationship between female beauty and female self-worth. For many of the younger women, the body is directly related to a woman’s self-worth and desirability. The reality TV women fit into what Douglas refers to as “enlightened sexism’s ideal female form,” one where the body type is always identical and the message is clear: “your body is your central, crucial resource in establishing your net worth as a female” (p. 216). This mentality caused anxiety for the older women but was embraced by many of the younger women.

**Values, Morals, and Standards**

In addition to the importance of inner and outer beauty and the role of sexuality, the women also focused on values, morals, and standards that are important in self-presentation decisions. Exposure to the overt sex-as-power imagery sparked in-depth discussions on personal values, morals, and standards in all three cohorts. These conversations were telling
of the women’s personal value systems as they compared what they viewed from the clips to their own beliefs about morals and standards. According to Schwartz (1994) values are “desirable trans-situational goals, varying in importance, that serve as guiding principles in the life of a person or social entity” (p. 21). Not only do values guide selection and evaluation of behavior and events, they are central to self-concepts (Katz, 1960). Values are an expressive aspect of the self, which increases understanding of both personal and group identities.

**Middle Age & Older Women**

“There’s something really messed up about their values.”

The women in the two older cohorts clearly differentiated between their own morals, values and standards and the women’s from the clips. The older women doubted that the reality TV women had self-respect or a strong sense of morals, which they thought were both important aspects of being a “good” woman. They felt the reality TV women’s standards were extremely low and that their sexualized persona and lifestyle supported a value system that the women described as “vapid,” “morally corrupt,” “superficial,” and “degrading.”

The older women questioned the values the women from the clips were taught by their families. Mel, 45, said, “How did these women get to this point? I know my mom would never tolerate this type of thing…the dressing, the way they act. I wonder if it’s a reflection of the way these girls were brought up? It seems that way for Lacy (Super Sweet 16). Her parents don’t seem too interested in teaching her a good value system or how to be a lady.”
Similarly, Cindy, 48, who has a high-school-age daughter, said:

I would never let my daughter go down this path. I’ve taught her about values, to value herself and her body. These women’s standards are so low. They have it all wrong. All they care about is the attention and the money, the fame. There’s something really messed up about their values. This is not the way I chose to live my life or the way I’ve taught my children to live.

The comments from the older women focused on how different the values portrayed by the reality TV women were from their own, as well as focused on their role as mothers to teach values and standards. Their discussion revealed a lot about their own identity constructs and what they personally value. Kelly, 52, said, “I would never stoop this low. It’s degrading and embarrassing. I value myself, all that I have to offer. I value my family too much to ever even imagine using my body in this way.”

The women in the two older cohorts also discussed the value system in relation to their own families, both their mothers and fathers and their children and grandchildren. They prided themselves on having a strong moral fabric, one that does not embrace the type of overt sexuality portrayed by the reality TV women. When asked what she thought about the Keeping Up with the Kardashians’ clip, Cindy, 48, said:

I hated it. I mean, the mother is exploiting her family. And in that particular episode, she’s exploiting Kim. The sad thing is that there are people in this country that do believe and aspire to have the same things, and it’s a gross misrepresentation of family life and the importance of family and values. I would not have sat through that episode because it’s a horrible example of family values. Values are too important to me to watch that or support it.
Cindy’s response was echoed by the other women in this cohort, even the two women, Nan and Sara, who watched and enjoyed these types of shows. The moral fabric of their own personal identity constructs guided their responses to seeing the women use their sexuality to wield power and garner attention.

According to Marty, 28, “I guess I just don’t value the same things that the women on the show value. My family is important. Being a good mom is important. I want to give back…to help people. It doesn’t seem like these things are important. They just care about looking good and spending money. It’s all pretty shallow, if you think about it.”

Penny, 36, agreed: “I just don’t see a lot of substance in these women. What do they do? Nothing. They don’t seem smart, or if they are then they hide it. It just goes against everything I was taught…everything I want to teach my kids. The things that are important. I just don’t see good principles. That’s important to me. I try really hard to be a good person.”

According to Karina, 29, “That’s really sad for Kim. If that’s how their life is then what do they have? What is she about, what are her values, and do people ever really take her seriously? If that’s what she’s really about then it’s doubtful. I want people to take me seriously. That’s important to me as a woman.”

On a different note, Sam, 35, who was single and did not have children, focused on how the women from *The Girls Next Door* clip were presenting a value system that was detrimental to women. Sam said:

Don’t get me wrong, I watch the show and I’m actually embarrassed to say that I enjoy it, but the women aren’t doing anything to help other women out, you know, the perception people have of women. These women value money and a certain lifestyle and in order to get it they live in a way that basically makes them subservient
to men. They might think they’re in control but they aren’t. Their values are messed up. I would rather be a strong woman on my own and place greater value on my own self-worth. They make it look fun but at the end of the day they’re prostitutes, basically.”

When discussing Kim Kardashian, however, Sam felt differently, describing Kim’s life as one that was also dominated by a value system steeped in materialism, but one that was controlled by Kim, and that made a difference. Sam described Kim as a “crafty entrepreneur” who had more control over her image than the women in The Girls Next Door. As a young woman who wanted to start her own business, Sam respected Kim Kardsahian’s success. Sam valued being independent and felt that a “strong woman” was both financially and emotionally independent.

In Sam’s eyes, Kim personified a strong woman, even though she was posing for Playboy in the clip and built her empire around a sexualized persona. Sam played down Kim’s infamous sex tape with rapper Ray J in 2007 that earned her $5 million when it was sold to video pornography distributor Vivid Entertainment, describing it as “Something that probably should have been a bad thing but actually seemed to jump-start her career.”

According to Sam, the sex tape and Kim’s sexualized persona are a significant part of her identity but they are not the things Sam chose to focus on. Sam looked for ways to relate to Kim by focusing on things she valued: Kim’s work ethic, ingenuity, and business savvy. Sam found the entrepreneurial aspects of Kim’s personality admirable and relatable because they were also a dominant part of Sam’s own value system.

Sam’s perspective varied from the other women in this cohort who focused more on family values, motherhood, and the pressure to teach their children values that were
associated with being a “good,” “respectable,” and “strong” woman. Sam, on the other hand, focused more on what it means to her to be a confident, strong, and successful woman in today’s world.

Regardless of their responses, personal values were an integral part of these women’s identity constructs and affected their evaluations of the reality TV women. Concepts of self, community, and what is right or wrong dominated the discussion in the two older cohorts.

Young Women

The young women were divided in their responses to seeing reality TV women use their sexuality to get ahead in life. Some felt the women were making moral sacrifices, while others embraced the women’s choice to engage in self-sexualization. The younger women’s perspectives shed light on how important their own value systems were and what types of things made up these value systems.

Some of the young women in the focus groups struggled with what they saw on the clips because it was so different from the personal values and belief systems they were taught by their parents. They had a hard time supporting what they saw in the clips because they were passionate about their own beliefs that were different from the reality TV women’s beliefs and behaviors.

The majority of the younger women, however, thought the reality TV women probably had a different value system from their own but were not bothered by the difference. These women were not as resolute about their personal beliefs and values in regards to expressing sexuality and were open to women expressing themselves in a myriad of ways.
Interpretation 1: Conflict

“These women have no standards, no values.”

According to Addie, 18, “I would say that Kim’s a very pretty woman but like as far as any kind of value system, I don’t think she has that and that’s important to me in looking up to someone. She’s not a good Christian. So, I don’t look up to her. But I do think she’s a beautiful woman.” Christian values were an important part of Addie’s identity.

According to Maya, 21:

I guess it’s kind of sad to see these women making these choices. I don’t think that’s valuable, like, whatever they say, you know beauty is fleeting. She’s going to get old and ugly later. And I think it’s sad that she defines herself by her physical looks, and not by something deeper…her morals or what she can contribute. It’s just a body. It’s not anything unique to her except for, like, her physical characteristics which she doesn’t have that much control over anyway. Values are important to me and they obviously aren’t to these women.

For these young women, values were more important than outer beauty and contributing to society was one of the most important aspects of their self-worth. The young women who were vocal about the differences between their own values and the reality TV women felt the reality TV women lacked “substance.” In Maya’s words, “They are women who just don’t have any depth. They are so shallow and don’t have anything to offer other than their bodies. I just can’t imagine being that shallow.”

Other young women, who felt similarly, commented on the difference in their definitions of success, compared to the reality TV women’s definitions of success. When asked what the women thought about Kim Kardashian, Andy, 19, said,
What she’s tried to do is be famous and she’s successful at that, you know, at getting attention and that seems like what her goal is. I guess it’s weird because I guess I would define success as being a good family member, a good student, or making good grades or making a lot of money and helping a lot of people, and I don’t think she’s done the best with her life that she could have done obviously or has good standards at all. I mean, I don’t see her as an admirable person at all.

The young women acknowledged the differences between their standards and the reality TV women’s standards. Erika, 18, said, “I thought it was kind of gross that she was posing for Playboy. I thought it was weird that she didn’t have any standards the whole time, throughout the whole thing. I would never sell my body like that. I respect myself and I want to be valued for other things, like my accomplishments, not my body.”

The young women who struggled with the value system adopted by the reality TV women revealed how important a strong value system is to their own identities. Posing for Playboy, dressing provocatively, and using your body to get ahead in life did not fit into these women’s perceptions of what it meant to be a “good Christian,” “a good girl,” “a worthwhile member of society,” or “the type of woman my mom raised me to be.” The value systems the women embraced and the standards that made up that system impacted the way they viewed the reality TV women and the way they responded to the shows, as we will see in the next sections of the Media Practice Model.
Interpretation 2: Choice

“I think we probably have different standards, but it takes all kinds.”

The second set of young women were more accepting of value systems different from their own, including the reality TV women’s value systems. They were open to other women’s choices and did not impose their own value systems.

Carly, 20, said, “The women from Girls Next Door are doing what they want to do. They know what’s important to them and they go get it. It’s what they value and it’s working for them, who am I to judge? They obviously have a pretty fun life.”

Eve, 20, said, “The women are close to their families. They have them on the show all the time and they seem to have good relationships. They value their relationships and I can relate to that.”

Karen, 21, said: “I guess I don’t really blame them. It’s their choice. It does kind of feel like if you’re against this stuff then you’re going to be called boring or a prude. It’s out there and there’s nothing we can do, so… I’m not going to judge them.”

Jewel, 21, said: “When it comes to this stuff, morals in this society now mean you’re boring. These women definitely aren’t boring and their lives aren’t boring either.”

Thus, many of the young women were hesitant to cast judgment. They worried that by passing judgment they might be considered a “prude” or “boring,” someone who is against women expressing their sexuality. They emphasized the notion of choice and were careful about imposing their own values on someone else’s ability to choose.

For example, Heather, 18, said, “It’s not like they’re prostitutes and people are like you have to do this or I’m going to kill you. They’re just like, ‘OK. I want to make money and I’m really pretty so ….’ And pretty people can go a long way. Beautiful people are more
successful. This is what they bring to the table. This is what they value and obviously it’s working for them. I’m not going to judge.”

The women who were more accepting of the values and morals portrayed were less vocal about their own value systems. They did not possess the same intensity when speaking of values and morals, nor did they bring up their own value systems when discussing the reality TV women. In contrast to the other women, these women focused on choice and individualism and were more accepting of the self-presentations of the reality TV women.

**Conclusions re: Values**

In Hitlin’s (2003) words, “Group- and role- identities revolve dynamically around the “core” of the self, which consists primarily of an individual’s personal value structure” (p. 124). Values are linked to the self through personal identity (Inglehart & Baker, 2000). It was clear from the women’s comments that their values are a dominant aspect of personal identity that guide selection and evaluation of others’ behavior and selection and interpretation of media content. The women’s discussion of personal morals, values, and standards was organic, because no specific questions were asked about how their own standards mattered. This is important because it helps gain a better understanding of how the women interact with the shows and make sense of what they see. In the next two sections of the Media Practice Model, interaction and application, this element of identity is meaningful, as previous research suggests that viewers who embrace morality generally respond negatively to reality TV (Reiss & Wiltz, 2004).

**Conclusions re: Identity**

Elements of identity emerged throughout the interviews for all cohorts and affected every aspect of the women’s responses to the clips. According to Woodward (1997),
“Identities are produced, consumed, and regulated within culture – creating meanings through symbolic systems of representation about the identity positions which we might adopt” (p. 2). The women who participated in this study communicated their conception of self through their responses to what they viewed as similar to or different from their own core values.

Erikson (1959) studied the relationship between the psychological and the social, the developmental and the historical, the cognitive and the affective, suggesting that identity is distinguished by a tension between differentiation and identification. Individuals need to assert boundaries and identify similarities between self and others, and seek integration into a major whole, constituted by family, culture, and society. Ellemers, Spears, and Doosje (2005) suggest that “Each of us has a range of different, cross-cutting, social identities, including those derived from highly meaningful and clearly delineated groups as well as those referring to more abstract and perhaps ambiguous social categories” (p. 164). As a result, and depending on which identity facet was most prevalent at the time, different perceptions of self and others emerged. For example, the women from the focus groups expressed different components of their identities, i.e., as women, wives, mothers, Christians, etc., at different times during the interviews, and these variations played a role in how they engaged with sexualized media images.

The multiple facets of the women’s identities illustrated the conflicts in the organized system that makes up each person’s inner self. According to Stryker and Serpe (1994) different elements of identity are invoked at particular times based on salience and centrality of these elements within and across social situations. If identity is defined as an “individual self-system, then managing multiple identities within that system becomes something of an
internal juggling act,” especially when faced with complex media messages (Brewer, 2001, p. 121). The identification of some of the central elements of the participating women’s identities provided a starting point for understanding how and why these women responded to the clips positively or negatively. In the next few sections, the focus turns to which elements of the women’s identities affect their ability to find pleasure in the programming.

According to Hill (2005), “When we watch television we can collect information and ideas that may help us to construct and maintain our own self-identities, or life biographies” (p. 90). All of the women engaged in social comparison with the reality TV women – contrasting their personal definitions of what it means to be a woman in today’s society, what it means to be sexy, attractive, to have good values, standards, and morals, with what they saw in the clips. As will become clear in the next sections on selection and interaction, the comparisons of self with other affect all aspects of media practice.
CHAPTER 6
SELECTION

Many of the women interviewed, especially the younger women, were familiar with the shows selected for this study. They knew details about the reality TV women’s lives outside the shows, and many of them had already seen the clips selected for the focus groups because they watched the shows regularly. This section focuses on the selection process and the reasons some women selected this type of programming to watch regularly, as well as why some women avoided such shows. Uses and gratifications theory proved to be a helpful framework in understanding and organizing the women’s consumption patterns of reality TV shows.

Viewing Practices

Four of the older women in the older cohort had not seen any of the shows used for the study and did not watch anything they could relate to the clips. Some said that if they happened to flip the channel to these shows or shows like these, they would “immediately change the channel,” “avoid it like it was the plague,” and “never waste my time on something appalling like this.” The women did not see these types of shows as fulfilling any biological, psychological or social need, and, therefore, avoided them. According to the women who did not watch any of the shows used in the study, the shows were in direct conflict with their moral fabric and belief system, so enjoyment was not possible.
Two of the older women were familiar with the shows. Sara, 56, watched *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* and *The Girls Next Door* regularly or occasionally depending on her sleep schedule, and also reported watching other reality shows with similar content. Nan, 56, also watched reality TV regularly, and was familiar with the premise of two of the shows (*Keeping Up with the Kardashians* and *The Girls Next Door*) and was familiar with the women featured on the shows. She even recalled personal information about the women that she learned from watching entertainment news shows and/or reading celebrity magazines. None of the older women had seen *My Super Sweet 16*, although two of them had heard about the show from their daughters. The older women who did not watch the shows cited “questionable content” as a primary reason for avoiding the shows.

All of the middle age women had seen *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* and *The Girls Next Door* at least once. *My Super Sweet 16* was the one show that most of the women had heard of but never actually watched. Two of the women watched *Keeping Up With the Kardashians* and *The Girls Next Door* on a regular basis, catching at least one or two episodes per week when it was in season. A few of the women watched other shows that according to them were similar in content to the clips they viewed during the focus groups, such as *The Real Housewives* series. The middle age women were vocal about the personal lives of the reality TV women and were also familiar with specific details of the women’s lives from *The Girls Next Door* and *Keeping up with the Kardashians*, even beyond what was presented on the shows.

The younger women were the most familiar with the shows used in this study, as well as the personal lives of the women who star in these shows. The most popular show for this cohort was *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, however, almost all of the younger women
had seen multiple episodes of My Super Sweet 16; several reported they had watched the shows since they were pre-teens. The Girls Next Door was also a popular show with this cohort. The young women watched the shows with roommates, sorority sisters, their families when they were home for a visit, or on their own. They often recorded the shows and watched them when they had free time. The young women who did not watch the shows attributed this to their busy work schedules, lack of access to a television, and participation in social activities. Only a few of the young women cited objectionable content as the reason for avoiding these shows.

All of the women who watched the shows had specific reasons for doing so; each reason fulfilled some type of need and provided a specific gratification. The dominant gratification themes across cohorts were relaxation and escape and the social nature of watching reality TV. These themes contributed to overall enjoyment, which is discussed later as part of interaction in the Media Practice Model. This section addresses the questions: Why do some women seek out shows such as these while others avoid them? Are there similarities and differences in the selection process used by women of different ages?

**Gratification Seeking**

The uses and gratifications perspective focuses on audience consumption patterns of specific mass media channels, such as reality TV (Lundy, Ruth, & Park, 2008). According to Lin (1996), “The strength of this theory is its ability to allow researchers to study mediated communication situations via a single or multiple sets of psychological needs, psychological motives, communication channels, communication’s content and psychological gratifications within a particular or cross-cultural context” (p. 575). The uses and gratifications framework includes five basic tenets: First, viewers’ behavior is purposive, goal-directed, and motivated.
Second, media is selected to fulfill biological, psychological, and social needs. Third, social and psychological factors influence the selection of various media outlets. Fourth, viewers are aware of their needs and know if and when these needs have been fulfilled. Fifth, different media compete with each other for attention, selection, and use (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974; Rubin & Rubin, 1985). In summary, uses and gratifications theory suggests that viewers are aware of their own media needs, make informed decisions regarding various media outlets and channels, review possible alternatives, and select media they feel will best fulfill the gratification they seek. The focus group discussions supported the tenets of the uses and gratifications perspective. The main gratification themes were: (1) relaxation and escape, and (2) social rewards.

**Relaxation and Escape**

*Older Women*

“I don’t want to think about serious stuff when I watch TV.”

Among the older women, Sara and Nan sought out such reality TV shows to help them “unwind,” escape their everyday lives, and relax. As Sara, 56, said, “It’s mindless, and I can tune everything else out. I don’t have to think about anything else. I can laugh and just get away from all the other stuff going on in my life…in my head.”

Nan, 56, agreed: “It’s a break from all the heavy stuff. It’s so far-fetched that I just have to laugh. I can relax and just get away from my worries.” Although Nan did not watch the selected shows viewed on a regular basis, she thought they were popular “because they are entertaining. The lifestyle is intriguing. I’m just looking for something that’s going to be entertaining and easy to watch so I can tune out all the other stuff.”
In the follow-up interview, Sara expounded on why these particular shows offered an escape from her everyday life, in contrast to the other options cable and network television provide. According to Sara, shows like *Keeping up with the Kardashians* and *The Girls Next Door* are low-involvement shows. She reported that she does not feel pressure to pay attention and content is “nothing serious.” Even when the shows try to address serious topics, it is done in a trivial and light-hearted way. Sara said that the mental involvement is so minimal that she feels like she’s taking a break from “real” life: “I’m just so tired of seeing shows that deal with terrible things, you know, like all the law-and-order type stuff. I don’t want to watch that in the middle of the night when I can’t sleep. I want something light, and I want something that just makes me laugh. I don’t want to feel anything too serious, too sad, too heavy.”

Thus, for Sara, “escape” occurred when she did not have to mentally engage in the content of the shows. To her, ironically, by choosing so-called reality TV shows that were not representative of a reality she knows, she gets the escape she was seeking. Sara said, “Although the Kardashians are a family and that is something I can relate to, they are so far out there…the decisions they make. The situations they’re in. It’s funny. It’s crazy stuff that I’d just never experience. I guess that’s what makes it an escape for me. It’s nothing I’ll ever experience.”

The reality shows used in this study were also described by Sara as “low-involvement” because she can watch a few minutes of the show or the entire episode without losing track of a storyline: “I don’t have to see every episode to know what’s going on. It’s almost like nothing ever happens. Or if it does then it’s not really relevant to the next episode. It’s easy to watch, easy to follow.”
**Middle Age Women**

“**It’s me-time and I can just let go and slow down.**”

The middle age women also had specific reasons for seeking out the shows used in this study. Similar to the older women, they also wanted an escape from the everyday worries of their lives and a time to relax and unwind. Relaxation and escape were quoted most often as reasons for watching the reality shows featuring sex-as-power imagery because the content was so far from their own realities. The middle age women referred to it as “mindless” television: “It relaxes me,” “It allows me to unwind,” “I can de-stress and forget about my day…my life,” and “It’s me-time, and I can just let go and slow down.”

The middle age women watched the shows to fill time when other activities were not pressing. They watched late at night, while their children were napping, or on the weekends when they had the house to themselves and happened upon a “marathon” -- an entire season of a show airing back-to-back in one day. Most of the women in this cohort did not actively seek out these types of reality TV shows or watch them habitually, but watched when it best suited their busy schedules, which varied daily. According to the middle age women, shows like this air so regularly that it is easy to find one whenever they are interested in watching.

Escape from the pressures of everyday life, including motherhood, husbands, and demanding jobs, was the dominant theme for this cohort. They sought out these types of shows, which Karina, 29, called “crazy fluff,” because they were so far from their own reality that it provided what Marty called a “true escape” and Sam called a “major escape” from the pressures of the real world. They viewed the lives lived by the reality TV women as fantastical and “removed from real life.” Similar to the older women, to feel the escape they
sought, these women wanted to watch something that portrayed a departure from their own realities.

Consistent with previous findings (Jones, 2003; Reiss & Wiltz, 2004) the women’s responses suggest that they are drawn to the novelty and entertainment aspects of the reality TV genre, specifically shows such as *The Girls Next Door* and *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*. Sam, 35, said, “These shows are just so far from my reality. I can’t imagine living like that. It’s kind of fun to watch, kind of gross, but definitely entertaining and crazy…very far from normal life.” Marty, 28, agreed: “It is so different than anything else. Their lives are just not something I’m use to seeing. I can’t change the channel because it’s so different. It’s addictive.”

These findings do not support other studies, however, that suggest that viewers are drawn to reality TV programming because they can relate to the characters or the characters are similar to the audience members in significant ways (Ebersole & Woods, 2007). In fact, for these women one of the main reasons they select this type of programming is because the characters and their lives are so different from their own that it allows them to escape the realities of their own day-to-day lives.

Another priority for the middle age women was the ease with which they could find and watch the shows. The women used digital video recorders to watch shows they cared about. Marty, 28, was the only woman in this cohort who recorded the shows used in the study. According to Marty, “I do DVR *Keeping up with the Kardashians* when it is in-season and I used to record *The Girls Next Door*. That way when I have a free minute and need to relax then the episodes are there for me.” The other women thought the shows aired regularly enough that they ended up watching them somewhat regularly, even without recording them.
Young Women

“These shows are ridiculous but they serve their purpose.”

Similar to the two older cohorts, the young women also watched reality TV, and specifically shows like the ones used in this study, to fulfill certain needs. These needs, however, varied more than for the two older groups. Many of the young women identified relaxation as a factor in selecting shows like the ones used in the study. They liked that the shows were humorous and fantastical. At least 18 of the 28 young women who participated in this study used the word “ridiculous” to describe the shows and the reality TV women. When asked what they meant by “ridiculous,” the women responded in a variety of ways but their answers all pointed to the humor in the situations presented in the shows.

As Heather, 18, said: “The show is ridiculous but it’s just so funny. It’s hard to stop watching. It makes me laugh. Maybe I’m laughing at them. I don’t know. I just think it’s so far-fetched. It’s just crazy stuff. That’s what I like about it.” Piper, 19, also described The Girls Next Door and Keeping up with the Kardashians as “ridiculous,” but loved watching both shows because, according to her, they are “super funny” and “so far out there.” When asked why she selected these shows, Piper said, “I guess I just want something light and fun. I like to take a break from studying or doing things for my sorority and just unwind. These shows are perfect for unwinding.”

The low-involvement aspect of the shows came up with this group as well as the two older cohorts. The young women liked the fact that they could pick up an episode during any season and enjoy it on its own without needing to know what had happened in the past. Ali, 21, said, “If I miss an episode of Grey’s then I have to find out what happened before I watch
again or it can get confusing. These shows aren’t like that. It doesn’t matter. They’re perfect for quick breaks or just to kill some time.”

The young women had more free time than the middle age women and, thus, were able to prioritize watching television. This group also used streaming technology to catch their favorite shows, citing the Internet as a great place to catch up on past episodes they missed or episodes their friends were discussing. The younger women were also more likely than the older women to record episodes using a DVR -- most of the women who said they enjoy the shows recorded them.

Recording technology, as well as the Internet, allowed the women to be selective in the shows they use to fulfill their needs. For example, a few of the young women said they record Keeping up with the Kardashians and The Girls Next Door so that when they need to laugh and unwind then they know they have access to a show.

In contrast to the two older cohorts, many of the young women watched because it helped pass time when they were bored and gave them something to do when they had no other plans. In contrast, the two older cohorts did not talk about the need to fill time, as they rarely felt they had free time. According to Jill, 22, “I watch if I have nothing else to do. I can watch a marathon of Girls Next Door on a Saturday and it helps pass time till it’s time to go out and do something else.” Eve, 20, said, “When I’m bored then I’ll watch shows like these. They’re funny and they always seem to be on so it’s a good way to kill time.” Many of the young women also pointed out the frequency with which these shows aired, suggesting that the only reason they have watched them is because they are always available. As Clara, 19, said, “You can’t turn on the TV without seeing either the Kardashians or The Girls Next Door. They’re ALWAYS on!”
In sum, the young women, in contrast to the two older cohorts, did not consistently cite “escape” as a reason they sought out shows like *Keeping up with the Kardashians* or *The Girls Next Door*. They wanted to relax but they did not talk about escaping from the worries or stresses of their real lives. All of the women were drawn to the shows because they were low-involvement. In other words, the women could watch the shows without having to think too much, they could watch the shows at all hours because of the nature of how the shows air and the use of the Internet and DVRs, and they could watch the shows quickly because they last only 30 minutes. As Marty, 28, said, “You can get your quick-fix of the show and get back to real life.” Or as Heather, 18, said, “I can take a break from studying and give my brain time off for 30 minutes and then get back to it.”

**Sociality of Reality TV**

According to Denham (2004), “Media enjoyment is contingent upon more than mere content, or a certain content genre, and in fact reflects existing social norms and the viewing situation in which those norms are observed” (p. 372). The social aspects of viewing proved to fulfill certain needs for the women who participated in this study, but varied by age and frequency of viewing.

**Middle Age and Older Women**

“*It’s kind of embarrassing to admit that I watch.*”

The two older cohorts were less likely to watch these types of shows with anyone else around and were also less likely to discuss the shows with others. They selected the shows to watch when they were on their own or were up late at night and could not sleep. They said they would change the channel and would be embarrassed to watch in front of others. Sara,
56, said, “I only watch when I’m on my own. It’s not really something I’d watch with anyone else. It would be embarrassing.”

Nan, 56, agreed: “I don’t really talk about these types of shows with anyone. If I’m watching Idol then I’ll talk to my friends about it each week or watch with my husband but this type of show really isn’t something I’d broadcast that I watch. It’s just my secret guilty pleasure.” Both women named other reality shows, mainly competition-based shows, they enjoyed watching with their husbands and friends, but not shows such as the ones used in this study.

The shows were a solitary activity for the older women. According to Sara, “If I’m watching something like this then my husband will say something like, ‘Really? You’re watching this crap?’ as if I’m crazy and then he’ll leave the room. I’ll usually just change the channel if I hear him coming or watch late at night. He refuses to watch anything like this, but he loves Dancing with the Stars. So, we can watch that together.” Sara expressed some level of embarrassment for watching the shows, especially as she was in the minority within her cohort, but was more vocal in our follow-up phone conversation regarding her enjoyment of the shows. Sara voiced concern for liking the shows, but was clear about the gratifications she experienced from her late night “guilty pleasure.” Sara described her desire to tune out the worries of her life and to have time for herself. The lack of sociality appealed to Sara and Nan, the two women who watched. The women craved the quiet time they associated with watching shows like the ones used for this study. Sara’s husband, who was recently retired, had just started spending more time at home making this time alone even more valuable. Sara said, “My husband is around a lot now and he wasn’t before so I just don’t have a lot of alone-time. I always had time to myself. I usually don’t watch during the day but if I can’t
sleep then I turn on the TV and it’s the time when I can just be quiet and watch. Sometime in the afternoons I might close the blinds and watch an episode or two. Not often but when I do…I really enjoy it.”

The older women, who watched these shows, watched alone, did not discuss the shows with others, and were limited in the time they could spend watching. They did not watch these shows to be involved in any social aspect or to enhance social connections with others in their lives. Instead, watching shows like *The Girls Next Door* and *Keeping up with the Kardashians* was more of a welcomed anti-social experience.

There were similarities in the responses between the two oldest cohorts. The lack of sociality around this particular type of reality TV dominated the conversations for the middle age women as well, but to a lesser degree.

In her follow-up interview, Marty, 28, said: “I know that when I turn these shows on that my husband is going to leave the room. He hates it. It’s kind of nice to have that time to myself, away from the kids, away from everything, and enjoy my guilty pleasure in peace. I know that probably sounds terrible but I just want a chance to breathe and wind down on my own.”

Penny, 36, said, “If my husband comes into the room and I want him to stay then I’ll immediately change the channel. If I want to be alone then I’ll leave it on.”

Karina, 29, said, “I’m also kind of embarrassed to let anyone know I’m watching it so it’s definitely something I do on my own….late at night if I can’t sleep or if he’s out of town then I’ll catch up on the shows. I look forward to it and it’s a nice getaway, something that only happens occasionally.”
Throughout the discussions, it became apparent that the women from the two older cohorts enjoyed the shows but felt some degree of shame when watching this type of programming, therefore, they almost always watched the shows alone and rarely admitted that they watched unless they were talking to someone they knew also watched. Feelings of shame were apparent in the way the focus group discussion took place. For example, before we watched any of the clips, the women were less open about their reality TV viewing habits. In fact, most of them characterized their viewing habits as minimal. After watching The Girls Next Door clip and the Keeping up with the Kardashian clip, it became apparent that the women had seen this show multiple times and knew details about the reality TV women’s personal lives. It seemed that the older women watched the shows more than they realized, or were willing to admit. Feelings of shame were attributed to the perception that reality TV is meant for an audience that is uneducated (“gullible,” “not very smart,” or “easily fooled”), materialistic (“plastic” or “shallow”), and uncultured (“low-class”). Even though the women who watched these types of shows felt varying degrees of shame, they still enjoyed watching.

Feelings of shame influenced how open the women were regarding their reality TV viewing habits. For example, Marty, 28, said: “I talk about this with my sisters because I know they watch it too. If something especially funny happens then I’ll see if they saw it or tell them about it. It’s something we can laugh about.” Marty went on to say that if she is not sure others watch “these types of reality shows” then she rarely brings them up. When asked what she meant by “these types of shows,” Marty responded: “Shows that focus on nothing really. You know, there are shows like Dancing with the Stars or American Idol…people have this perception that they’re better. But shows like The Kardashians, people think it’s not
good, you know, materialistic crap. I guess I agree but I still watch. I just don’t tell many people because it’s embarrassing.”

Karina, 29, also discussed the social aspect of viewing: “Believe it or not, there are a few of us that talk about it at work. It’s funny to see the shows that certain people watch. Sometimes it surprises me. It’s fun…it kind of motivates me to watch so that I at least know what they’re talking about. I would never have brought it up though. I only admitted I watch after I knew someone else watched too.”

This was a constant theme with this group: they discussed the shows only with others who they knew watched. Otherwise, they denied watching if they felt they would be judged. According to Penny, 36, “I wouldn’t just admit to watching it….not until I know someone else watches. Otherwise, it’s deny, deny, deny. Kim who?” Similar to Penny, the other women who watched on a somewhat regular basis also felt shame for selecting this type of programming; however, once they were certain that others watched then they enjoyed discussing the shows.

As the discussions continued, the middle age women were animated in their enjoyment or disdain for the shows and the reality TV women. They laughed throughout the discussions and seemed to enjoy discussing the shows’ content, as well as the women portrayed on the shows. They enjoyed having the opportunity to watch the show in a social setting, i.e. with friends, and experienced pleasure from the social nature of watching. The middle age women did not actively seek out the shows for the social aspect of viewing, but enjoyed the social aspect of conversing about the show when it presented itself. At the end of the middle age women’s interview, a few of the women expressed their pleasure in taking part in the study, for example, Marty said, “That was fun. I never expected research to be fun
but I enjoyed it.” Sam also described enjoyment: “I don’t get to talk about these shows very often so that was great.” The women value the alone time associated with actually watching the shows but also enjoy the social interactions that were possible because they choose to watch the shows.

**Young Women**

“I usually end up watching with my sorority sisters. It’s more of a group thing.”

In contrast to the older women, social affiliation played a significant role in the actual process of reality TV viewing for the younger women in this study. This was a consistent theme that emerged from the college-aged focus groups. This supports previous findings with college-aged viewers, which suggested that watching reality TV is a social phenomenon (Nabi, et al., 2003).

The younger women watched reality TV with their roommates, friends, and family members. The shows used for this study seemed to bring the younger women together, not only in the actual act of watching the shows, as they often watched in group settings, but also in the ongoing discussions that followed the shows. Television is criticized for leading to a breakdown in social interaction because when people watch TV they spend less time developing interpersonal relationships (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). In contrast, the young women used reality TV to enhance their interpersonal relationships and cited the social aspects of watching reality TV as one of the reasons they were attracted to it. Similar to Lundy, Ruth, and Park’s (2008) findings, the young girls even watched shows that they did not enjoy so they could take part in the social affiliation representative of reality TV viewership. This supports what Ebersole and Woods (2007) describe as a “long-held truism”
of reality TV, the idea that young people watch reality TV so they can have something to talk about with their friends (p. 34).

Another element of sociality that emerged only from the younger groups was the women’s relationships with the women from the shows. According to Hill (2005) reality TV is fascinating to audiences because “the focus on individual stories is something viewers are attracted to precisely because these particular programs offer narratives they can relate to” (p. 91). For the older women this was not true. The women who were attracted to the shows were attracted because the content was so different from their own lives, something they could not relate to. For some of the young women, especially the regular viewers, the opposite was true. They focused on the areas where they could find common ground and looked at the women as possible friends, imagining themselves as a part of the women’s lives. The young women’s fascination with a different lifestyle was one of the reasons they sought out these shows.

Heather, 18, said, “I think it’s interesting to see other people’s lives and relate to them, just like you’re making friends with other people. I feel like I’m friends with them and getting updates on their lives.” Other young women also talked about the women from the shows as if they were friends and viewed the shows as a time to catch up on the happenings in the reality TV women’s lives. This relationship was present only in the young women who watched the shows regularly. These women were also more likely to follow the women’s lives through other media outlets, such as celebrity gossip blogs, magazines, and TV shows.

Kris, 20, said, “It would be fun to be friends with them. Can you imagine all the stuff you’d get to do? They’re always going places and going out to all these places that
average person just couldn’t do, couldn’t get into. I’d like to be friends with them. I know so much about them. It would be easy to be friends.”

This supports Nabi et al.,’s findings, which suggest that people watch reality TV because it offers them a level of intimacy and connection with the people on the shows. A desire to feel connected to the reality TV women attracted the younger audiences to the shows. Even though they did not have much in common with the women from the shows, they tried to find common ground and develop a connection.

According to Wollheim (1974) identification is characterized by an external component, and involves imagining being someone else and imagining behaving like someone else. The ability to identify with others develops early in life and is fundamental to all social aspects of life (Erickson, 1968). By identifying with others and imitating certain characteristics, elements of identity are refined. Heavy viewers, who enjoyed the shows, imagined themselves living the lifestyles presented on the shows, focusing on how the reality TV women were able to buy whatever they want, went to the hottest clubs and restaurants, and traveled to exotic places.

Lena, 21, said:

It’s fun to imagine I’m in their shoes. What would I do if Hugh Hefner came knocking on my door and wanted to give me a bunch of money to pose for Playboy? It’s fun to think about that stuff and to imagine getting to do what these women get to do. I imagine wearing the clothes and going to Las Vegas or Cabo or Europe and getting treated like royalty. The cars and the trips to the spa. I mean, if these women want something then they don’t even have to think about it. They just go buy it. Or
call the butler and tell him to get it for them. I like to imagine I have that freedom….those choices.

Lena was not the only young woman who envied the “freedom” the women from the shows experience because of the money they have at their disposal, as well as the perks of being famous. The young women cited fame as an enviable aspect of the reality TV women’s lives.

In sum, personal identification with the on-screen characters was an important element in attracting young women to the reality shows used for this study. Identification was described only by the young women who watched the shows regularly and enjoyed them, however. According to Cohen (2001), “Within media studies, identification with media characters has generally been understood to denote feelings of affinity, friendship, similarity, and liking of media characters or imitation of a character by audience members” (p. 250). Affinity and friendship were the main factors the young women identified. Although most of the young women could not identify with the lifestyle the reality TV women lived, they still identified with their desire to have fun, to accomplish things, and to live life on their own terms.

Conclusions re: Selection

Past research suggests that the range of gratifications enjoyed by regular reality TV viewers exceeds that of the casual viewer, and that the casual viewer seeks out this type of programming primarily out of boredom, whereas regular viewers seek out this type of programming out of a need to be entertained (Nabi, et al., 2003). The only group that cited boredom as a motivator for selecting these types of shows was the young women. There were more young women who watched the shows casually and these women were less likely to
seek out the shows to fulfill specific needs. They just happened upon the shows and watched out of the need to alleviate boredom, just as Nabi, et al., suggested. The young women, who watched the shows regularly, watched the shows more often than any other women who participated in the study. In other words, even the older women who were considered “heavy viewers” for their cohort watched the shows significantly less than the young women.

The findings of this study support Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch’s (1974) proposal that media uses and gratifications differ across age and lifestyle. Lifestyle along with certain facets of identity seemed to dictate much of the selection process for this group of women. The young women were the only ones to cite personal identification with the reality TV women as a reason they watched. In contrast, the women from the two older cohorts were more likely to discuss lack of identification as a reason they watched, citing the far-fetched nature of the shows as appealing. For the younger women, heavy viewers were the only ones to discuss identification as a pleasurable aspect of viewing. For the two older cohorts, the women sought out the shows to escape from their lives. The novelty of the shows provided the vehicle for escape.

The young women rarely discussed feeling shame when watching reality TV, often describing group settings as their viewing experience. The two older cohorts, who watched alone, consistently described feeling “embarrassed” that they watched the shows, avoiding telling other people until they knew they also watched. Some of the young women identified the shows as “low quality,” but did not describe feelings of shame.

Carly, 20, said: “We grew up with reality TV. It is what it is. Sometimes I watch a lot of it. Sometimes I’m just not in the mood. Everyone I know has their shows that they watch.
If they say they don’t watch then they’re probably lying. For me, it’s just TV. Nothing to feel bad about.”

The next section moves beyond the women’s reasons for watching and explores how women interact with the shows. How do they make sense out of what they viewed?
Dominant themes related to interaction are explored, including perceived realism, enjoyment, and living in a highly sexualized culture.
CHAPTER 7

INTERACTION

This section explores the different ways the women interacted with reality shows featuring women using their sexuality as a means for gaining success and wielding power. The goal of this section is to address the ways in which the women from different cohorts made sense of the women from the shows, specifically to interrogate the processes of interaction. According to Steele and Brown (1995), “Interaction is the cognitive, affective, and behavioral engagement with media that produces cultural meaning” (p. 558), and deals with what happens when women view shows such as Keeping up with the Kardashians or The Girls Next Door. This section explores how the shows used for this study, which feature overt sex-as-power imagery, are made meaningful, relevant and pleasurable by female viewers. Differences across cohorts and between heavy, light, and non-viewers of such programming are also addressed.

Cognitive interaction refers to how viewers make sense of what they see, i.e., the mental involvement experienced while processing what they view. This might include judgment of characters, assessment of storyline, or issues of relevance and realism. Affective interaction refers to emotional responses or how viewers feel while they watch. The behavioral component refers to the viewing experience, including behaviors during watching and past behaviors related to the message content.
Three interaction themes dominated the focus groups, including: perceived realism, enjoyment, and sexualized culture. Each of the themes is discussed in turn in this section.

**Perceived Realism**

Perceived realism is the extent to which viewers interact with the shows as if they are true representations of reality. Does their perception of the realism of the shows change the way they make sense of what they view? Also, how does the reality presented on the shows compare with the viewers’ own perceptions of reality? Perceived realism was a dominant theme for all focus groups, representing one of the most frequent cognitive evaluations the women engaged in during the viewing process. The women’s definitions of real versus fake affected their interaction with the shows and characters in fundamental ways.

For the women in the focus groups, “perceived realism” had to do with how close the TV representation of the women’s lives was to the reality TV women’s real day-to-day lives. The viewers also considered if the women presented themselves authentically or if they were acting for the cameras. The women also discussed realism in relation to how the reality presented on the shows compared to what they know of as reality, suggesting that while the shows might present the women’s real lives, their lifestyles were so foreign that it was a skewed representation of reality. Perceived realism affected the viewing experience for heavy and light viewers versus non-viewers, as well as across cohorts.

**Older Women**

“It just seems like there’s no reality in reality TV.”

The older women, especially the ones who did not watch the shows used for this study, were critical of the realism of the shows and cited the lack of reality as a reason for avoiding them. The two women who had previously watched and enjoyed the shows used in
this study were not as concerned with realism, accepting their contrived nature and embracing glimpses of what they considered an alternative reality. All the women from the older group experienced the shows as an extreme departure from what they know as reality or what they called “normal life,” “real people’s reality,” and “real life.” For some women, the departure from reality contributed to their enjoyment, while for others, the departure made enjoyment impossible.

The older women agreed that the shows were not a realistic portrayal of the reality TV women’s lives, and they questioned to what degree the shows were constructed and to what degree they presented the women authentically. Kelly, 52, said, “It’s almost like it’s not reality. They’re like want-to-be actors. So, they’re only doing it to be on TV. I hope they’re only doing it to be on TV! I hope that’s not their real world. I mean, but it could be.” Kelly’s comment is typical of the tension the viewers felt between thinking that the shows present a form of reality and feeling certain they are produced fictions.

Sara, 56, said: “The show is definitely edited…it tells a story every time so you know it’s not all real, but I do think that they get to do all the stuff and it shows the back story or lets you see them getting ready. That part of it is interesting.”

For a few of the older women, the lifestyles presented on the shows were too extreme for “everyday America.” Mel, 45, said, “To me, these shows are more the Hollywood group, maybe more about the California group. It doesn’t seem like reality to me. You know, it seems more like a farce. That is a minute amount of people that act like that and get that opportunity and do all that and have the huge house like that. It doesn’t interest me at all. It’s not reality.” Mel also believed that the women from the show are, “acting to make you think
it’s real,” and that although they might actually live in the houses and go to the parties, it is impractical to think that the cameras do not affect their behavior.

Other women from this group also attributed the extreme sexuality to a Hollywood lifestyle, one that is far removed from the lifestyle that most Americans live, making it what Mel called an “un-real reality.” The women from this group focused heavily on how the reality presented in the shows and reality they experience on a day-to-day basis do not coincide.

According to Sara, 56, one of the reasons she enjoys Keeping Up with the Kardashians and The Girls Next Door is because the lifestyles presented on the shows are so far removed from her own reality. Additionally, Sara also questioned the realism of the shows and how close they are to the women from the show’s own realities. When asked why she likes it, Sara said, “Well, because it’s so ridiculous. And I think about the sisters [Kim, Khloe, and Kourtney] and what they’re saying to each other. Um, and, do they act like that all the time? It’s interesting to me to wonder if it’s really their life and I think that probably it’s not. But some of it must be.”

For Sara the lack of realism did not affect her ability to enjoy the show, nor did it prevent her from seeking out the show when she needed a break from her own reality: “When I’m watching, I’m amazed at how different it is from my life….so far from my reality. It’s really out there. I like to see what they are doing and see how they live their lives. I like to see how different it is.”

Nan, 56, agreed: “I don’t really care how real the shows are. It’s such a departure from anything I know. I can’t imagine they’re not acting for the cameras or that it’s not
totally contrived but I just don’t care. I think some of it must be real but most of it is probably produced. Who cares? I don’t. I really don’t think too much about it.”

The older women who did not watch or enjoy the shows questioned the shows’ realism and blamed their disinterest partly on the lack of realism. Cindy, 48, said, “I just don’t know how you can have them filming and not be aware of that and not be an actor at that point. How do you have someone come into your house on a weekly basis and not play the part? I mean, you have to draw the public in with the shock factor. So, I don’t know how it could ever be normal. It’s just not real.”

Some of the older women were angered by the façade of realism. Mel, 45, said, “You watch this type of stuff and think, ‘If they think that I think it’s reality then they must think I’m pretty stupid.’ It makes me want to turn the channel even more because I’m not ignorant. It’s insulting.”

In sum, the women who liked the shows did not care about how real they were and the women who disliked the shows blamed their dislike partly on the lack of realism. This contradicts previous findings suggesting realism is an important aspect of enjoyment of the reality TV genre (Lundy, Ruth, & Park, 2008; Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2007). In contrast to desiring realism, the women who enjoyed the shows embraced the alternative reality presented by the shows and were less critical of the show’s realism during the viewing process. In other words, they did not care as much how realistic the shows were because they enjoyed watching.
Middle Age Women

“That didn’t really happen, right?!?”

The middle age women focused less on perceived realism than any other group. They seemed less concerned with how real the shows were and more concerned with the pleasure they experienced while watching. This group expressed an understanding that the shows were not true presentations of reality, in both the degree to which it portrayed the reality TV women’s real lives and emotions, as well as to the extent to which the shows are a valid portrayal of real life. The women from this group wanted to see authentic moments -- instances where the TV women were “being real,” “not acting,” and “showing who they really are.”

Marty, 28, said she likes Keeping up with the Kardashians and The Girls Next Door, because, “I think just…I don’t know, the drama maybe. I mean…the whole time I watch it I’m thinking, ‘That’s so fake. That didn’t really happen, right?!? That was planned. That was staged.’ So I think I kind of watch it thinking that it isn’t real.”

Karina, 29, said, “It’s very scripted. Like the part where Kim was walking into the store to talk to her mom. She had a smile on her face that just seemed fake. Right? Her just talking about the whole, ‘I don’t know if I’m going to pose for Playboy.’ She didn’t really have any emotion behind it. She was just trying to act.”

The women from this group talked about the degree to which the reality TV women were acting, suggesting that the shows were a hybrid between fiction and reality. The women were aware the shows are produced, cut to make a meaningful storyline, and certain events and occurrences are contrived. They viewed the shows as “somewhat fictional” because they are created and edited to pull viewers in and increase ratings.
The women from this group were quick to point out instances in the clips that were “fake,” but they were not particularly bothered by the contrived nature of reality TV in general. When asked if it mattered to her if the shows presented a true version of the women’s realities, Marty said, “No. As long as I know it’s not real. I think when I watch it I know that they don’t really live like this. I mean it is real in some ways. I mean, they own that store. They probably don’t work there very often. I kind of doubt it. I just don’t really care.”

Marty went back and forth on the elements of the show that were real versus produced but also continually stressed that it did not really matter to her if it was real or fake. Marty did not watch the shows as if they were a “documentary of real life,” instead she watched to be entertained and to escape certain realities of her own life. Her acceptance of the contrived nature of the shows allowed Marty to lower her guard and enjoy the shows without constantly casting a critical eye on what is real and what is manufactured.

“Authentic” moments helped foster affinity for the shows. During a discussion of the Kardashian family, Sam, 35, said, “You can tell that even though they’re making fun of their sister, that there is some genuine emotion behind it. That they’re kind of jealous of their sister. You feel the underlying tension. Even if it is scripted. It’s kind of always there. And it’s cool to watch it. It feels real. I like that. I can really get into the show.”

Marty, 28, said, “I like when they’re being real. You can tell when it’s something they’re doing for the show, like when she’s deciding to pose for Playboy. You know she’s already made her decision. But other times, she might talk about her relationships or have certain conversations with her mom. You can tell they’re being real. It doesn’t happen that often but it’s nice when it feels real.”
In sum, the middle age women wanted to see the “real” side of the women presented on the shows. The act of distinguishing reality and fiction (i.e., acting) enhanced their viewing experience. The women from this group felt closer to the women on the screen when they viewed their actions as genuine, expressing a deeper connection to the shows and the reality TV women. In addition to their desire to escape “real life,” the search for authentic moments kept the women from this group going back to the shows. Overall, the group engaged with the shows as if they were fictional yet real, produced yet authentic. It was the interplay between these elements that fostered a more active viewing process, as well fostered a deeper connection between the viewers and entertainers.

**Young Women**

“The cameras have a lot to do with how they act.”

As a whole, the young women were not concerned with the realism of the shows. Some of the young women felt it was a realistic portrayal of the women’s lives, while others felt it was somewhat scripted but still enjoyable. For many of the women, the “ridiculous” nature of the shows was what made them so enjoyable. For a few of the younger women, however, the “ridiculous” nature of the shows turned them off and the lack of realism made it impossible to find pleasure in watching.

Many of the younger women also focused on the authenticity of the women from the clips. For this group, that meant how “real” they felt the women from the shows were being on camera and whether or not they were being themselves or acting.

In response to *The Girls Next Door*, Piper, 19, said, “I think it’s awful that they’re in *Playboy*, or Playmates or whatever, but they’re so endearing and, like, Kendra is hysterical. She’s so funny. She’s like real, I mean, she’s really nerdy and funny. I just like her.”
Other young women also expressed affinity toward the women from *The Girls Next Door* and *Keeping up with the Kardashians* because according to them, they let their guard down and let viewers see a more unassuming side to their personalities.

Lena, 21, described Khloe from *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* as “Such a smart ass who just tells it like it is. She doesn’t let Kim get away with stuff and I like that. Sometimes the others act really fake but Khloe keeps it real.” The glimpse into the reality TV women’s real feelings attracted many of the young women to the shows.

When asked what she thinks about while watching the shows, Ellen, 20, said, “I think about their lives. I like seeing them at home, seeing them fight with their family, seeing them just act goofy. They are so put together most of the time so it’s nice to see them let go a little and be real.”

The young women were critical of the shows’ realism but still attempted to find moments of authenticity related to the reality TV women’s personalities. The young women found certain parts of the shows authentic and others contrived. For example, the young women were the only ones to focus on the personal interviews, which are a staple of most reality television shows. The direct interviews with the women from the shows were viewed as less realistic by many of the younger women.

Anna, 22, said, “When they’re talking directly to the camera, it seems pretty fake, like they’re acting. Who knows when they actually filmed it…maybe at the end of the season, maybe before stuff even happened, but when they’re just at home being themselves or out with friends then it seems more real.”

Lena, 21, described the personal interviews as “a little phony” because the backgrounds seemed staged and she noticed that the women from the shows often wear the
same clothes when they are discussing events that happened on different days. The candid moments of day-to-day interaction were viewed as more realistic representations of the women’s personalities.

On some level almost all of the women from the younger focus groups were critical of the shows’ realism, but in an accepting way. In other words, they know the shows are highly edited and produced but they also believe certain moments are genuine. The search for the authentic, as well as the acceptance of the contrived, made it possible for many of the younger women to enjoy the shows and to engage with them in a pleasurable way. It also made the women from the shows more endearing and took the focus away from their sexualized personas, moving it to other aspects of their personalities.

Char, 19, said, “I’ve seen probably like, five episodes, and I think… because you have this image of Kim Kardashian, like, being how she really is, but seeing their family, even though it’s probably completely fake, it’s entertaining for people because she is such a celebrity and very sexual. So like, seeing another dimension is why I watch it.”

April, 20, agreed: “I know the show is fabricated, but it’s entertaining, and when you’re watching, you forget what they do…I forget they’re Playboy bunnies, because you get to see a different side and it makes them more relatable.”

For many of the young women, the question of realism was a moot point because they have grown up with reality TV, accepting that it ranges from 100% contrived, to gently scripted, to a somewhat accurate portrayal of people, life, and events. The younger women do not watch reality TV with the expectation of seeing reality; instead, they watch reality TV with the expectation of being entertained.
The younger women were fascinated with the differences between their own realities and the realities presented on the shows. From the clothes the women wear (or lack thereof), to the parties they attend, to the perks that come with being wealthy and famous, these things are so far from what the young viewers experience in their day-to-day lives that they expressed curiosity and attraction to the novelty of a different lifestyle. Watching something so different from their own lives did not cause them to feel anxiety; instead, it helped them feel more normal and more grounded. This type of response to the clips proved to be most prevalent in women who watched the shows regularly.

More so than any other cohort, the younger viewers focused on whether or not the shows portray a version of reality. According to Heather, 18, the clip about Lacey from *My Super Sweet 16* was both bizarre and intriguing:

I thought that, um, it was little bizarre. She wanted to pose with snakes. It was interesting. I see why people watch it. The intriguing thing is that that is her reality. It’s one thing to say, “that’s not real,” but it is, that really happened to her, and maybe, like, it wasn’t all her idea or it wasn’t her original thing, but she really did that. She really flew down to Florida and posed with these snakes and put those pictures of herself up at her party. It’s bizarre. It’s intriguing that that’s her reality. Jill, 22, said: “You can’t deny that the women get to do this stuff. They get to go on *Lettermen* and *The View* and they do photo shoots and are on the cover of magazines. The show lets you see them doing this stuff, along with some of their day-to-day lives, which are pretty out there. So, there are elements of reality there. I think they have to make stuff up sometimes but it’s real too. They really do this stuff. It’s their reality.
For many of the young women the line between what is real and what is produced was easily blurred. Some of the women wanted to believe that what they viewed on the shows was reality. In her follow-up interview, Heather, 18, discussed how sometimes she forgets the shows are not real:

I guess the frustrating part about it to me is that you catch yourself thinking that it is really their life and then you’re like “wait, no!” they’re really on TV. And you think you should have the same life as them but really it’s two different worlds, but you’re all living in the same world. I don’t know. I think it’s interesting, I mean, I don’t feel like people are scheming against me because it’s real but when I’m watching a movie I’m like, “Oh, they wanted to add that in there for entertainment value.” And they throw in all these special effects, but when I watch some of these reality shows, I’m like, “That’s real! That’s how they really feel! That really happened.”

Heather’s comments address the two areas of realism that dominated the younger women’s discussions: the realism of the women’s lives and feelings as well as the relationship between what the reality TV women know as reality and the world that everyday people live in. For the young women who enjoy the shows, these things did not matter. For the women who do not watch or enjoy the shows, the lack of realism was a source of irritation and one of the reasons they responded negatively to the shows and the women from the shows.

Most of the young women expressed acceptance related to the contrived nature of reality TV; however, for a small number of young women, the lack of realism bothered them.

Jes, 18, said:
Where is the line between what is reality and what you’re being manipulated to believe? And then, I mean, I don’t like that it is ambiguous like that. And also, that about the 15 minutes of fame - even if it is unscripted, you can tell that these people are not presenting themselves like they actually are because they just want more attention. They’re forcing themselves to fit into a certain role because they know it will get them attention based on other things they’ve seen previously. That bothers me.

Ariana, 20, said, “Nothing about the Kardashians is anything but fabricated and everyone knows it but keeps watching so they keep producing this nonsense. It’s crap….fake crap.”

Jocelyn, 21, also said: “I don’t enjoy it. I feel like it’s such a poor reflection of reality and I don’t care about their lives and I think they’re ridiculous.” For these women, the shows’ lack of realism negatively affected their ability to enjoy the shows.

Conclusions re: Perceived Realism

Perceptions of realism dominated the discussions in all cohorts. At the heart of reality TV consumption rests the opportunity for viewers to identify reality. Perceived realism is the reality recognized as authentic by each viewer, and can vary from one viewer to the next. The women who watched TV regularly were more accepting of the realism (or lack thereof) of reality TV, understanding that such shows are a mix of real and contrived. The women who did not watch a lot of TV, and specifically the reality TV genre, were less accepting of the contrived nature of these types of shows and cited the lack of realism as a reason they were turned off by the programming.
Past studies suggest that the “real” context of reality TV made it possible for viewers to get more involved with the characters and situations of the shows (Lundy, Ruth, and Park, 2008). Similarly, Papacharissi and Mendelson (2007) found that “in order for people to enjoy reality TV as an entertaining and relaxing medium, they had first to accept the realism of its content and develop a liking for it” (367). Research suggests that viewers enjoy and regularly watch shows they perceive as real (Ebersole & Woods, 2007).

In contrast to such previous findings, however, lack of realism did not seem to impact whether or not the shows were viewed regularly or the women’s level of enjoyment. The women who watched and enjoyed the shows did not care if they were true portrayals of the women’s lives or of the women’s true personalities. They enjoyed knowing that the reality presented on the shows was not their own reality. Interestingly enough, it was the women who avoided the shows and who did not enjoy them who cited the lack of realism as one of their reasons. For the women who watched regularly, moments of authenticity were present and provided enjoyment. For the women who avoided the shows, moments of authenticity were not feasible in the reality TV genre.

Douglas (2010) argues that one reason audiences like reality TV so much is the question mark regarding what is real and what is staged, suggesting that audiences like not knowing how much of what they watch is real and how much is scripted. This discord between reality and construction provides a source of speculation and internal debate that allows audiences to let their guard down and enjoy the shows, as well as to keep their guard up by questioning the editing, the sets, and identifying other signs of manipulation. Some like the resulting active viewing experience.
To some degree, all of the women from the focus groups have learned to watch reality TV with a trained suspension of disbelief. For the women who enjoy the shows, perceived realism is relatively insignificant. These women simply do not care if scenes are manipulated or manufactured. The women who enjoy the shows are not in denial about the reality of them but do look for instances of authenticity in the leading women from the shows. The instances of authenticity help viewers develop deeper relationships with the women from the shows and find pleasure in what they consider authentic moments.

According to Thompson (2009) there are two types of viewers, “some demand credibility and others just want to be entertained” (272). Thompson believes that educated viewers know what reality TV is and what it has become and respond accordingly. The women from the focus groups, especially the ones who watched and enjoyed the shows used in this study, focused on the entertaining aspects of the shows and were less concerned with how real the shows are.

In sum, perceived realism influenced the women’s interaction process. Perceptions of realism enhanced the viewing experience for many of the women by providing opportunities to relate to the women from the shows on a deeper level and engage with the shows in an active way by providing glimpses of authenticity. This contradicts Hall’s (2003) findings where viewers described certain reality TV shows as less enjoyable because they lacked “typicality,” that is, it did not “represent something that most people would experience” (p. 634). The departure from the norm common to the shows used for this study proved to be a reason most of the women enjoyed the shows, not a deterrent.

The next section deals with enjoyment and the various interaction processes that allow some women to enjoy overtly sexualized content, while others find it offensive.
Enjoyment

This section focused on answering the question: Why are female viewers entertained by this type of programming, specifically, what contributes to their enjoyment of reality shows that feature women using sex to sell themselves? This section explored both the cognitive evaluations and affective responses that underlie the more general assessment of entertaining, moving beyond traditional uses and gratifications studies that typically stop after addressing why viewers seek out certain programming. Instead of simply categorizing the dominant uses and gratifications that drive viewers’ choices, this section focused on how women engage with shows that present an overtly sexualized “reality,” and specifically what contributed to their enjoyment, or lack thereof.

Nabi and Krcmar (2004) suggested that there are two main types of enjoyment related to watching reality TV, the first being “message-related enjoyment,” where viewers respond to the content of the show based on cognitive and affective assessments and the second being “experience-related enjoyment,” where viewers focus more on the “extent to which the consumption experience is itself pleasurable, based on a broader range of information, including social and environmental factors” (p. 291). The media messages (specific) versus the media experience (global) work together to make up the overall viewing experience and shape viewers’ responses to what they choose to watch. As Nabi and Krcmar (2004) suggested, “A positive or negative attitude toward a media offering is largely synonymous with indications of having enjoyed or not enjoyed it” (p. 295).

According to Raney (2003), enjoyment refers to the pleasurable affective and cognitive response to a stimulus experienced by viewers. Raney suggested that both affective and cognitive factors influence viewers’ evaluation of media as enjoyable or not. Affective
responses include emotional responses, such as empathy and identification with media characters. Cognitive responses include assessments of the actions of the characters. Enjoyment denotes both emotional investment and desired states, both of which emerged from the focus group discussions. An important part of conceptualizing enjoyment, specifically in relation to sex-as-power imagery, is understanding the factors that influence why enjoyment occurs for some women and not for others. The women who participated in this study expressed a wide and often contradictory range of responses about their enjoyment of shows featuring overtly sexualized content.

**Older Women**

“I don’t know why I enjoy it, I just do.”

Nabi and Krcmar’s (2004) assertion that a positive attitude toward the shows would go hand in hand with enjoyment did not hold true for Sara and Nan, the two older women who said they watched and enjoyed these types of reality TV shows. Although Sara and Nan both enjoyed the clips and enjoyed watching similar shows, they were critical of the shows’ messages.

Nan, 56, said, “I don’t agree with the lifestyle or the way the women are making their money, but I still enjoy watching because it’s so different from what I know. I don’t think it’s good for women but I can still watch and enjoy it.”

Sara, 56, who has three grown daughters and two granddaughters, said: “I know it’s not a great message and it’s definitely not something I’d want my granddaughters to watch or emulate, but it is entertainment and it’s funny and I’m just not going to get upset about it. It’s the way things are, it’s what’s out there these days and I think parts of it are hilarious. I can watch and separate it from my life.”
In the follow-up interview, Sara said:

I don’t really feel any guilt when I watch it. Her [Kim Kardashian] success does not bother me. I don’t know that I can really articulate it, but I don’t feel anything negative when I watch it. It doesn’t upset me. If I had young women around me while I was watching then I think it probably would because it’s really pretty awful, but as far as me just looking at it on my own, it just doesn’t bother me. I have no negative feelings about watching it even though it’s not a great show for women. I still enjoy it.

These findings are consistent with what Ang (1985) found in her study of the pleasure women derived from watching the TV soap opera, *Dallas*. Ang found that many viewers characterized the show as “bad television” but still enjoyed watching.

For the other four women in the group, Nabi and Kremar’s findings were more germane -- their feelings toward the shows and the shows’ content were synonymous with their inability to enjoy it. They felt the shows and the women on the shows were “pathetic,” “unfortunate,” “self-absorbed,” “detrimental,” “destructive,” “prostitutes,” and “off-putting.”

According to the women who were turned off by the shows, they would not waste their time on shows like *Keeping up with the Kardashians* and *The Girls Next Door* because the content and the messages were so far removed from their own personal beliefs and values. As mothers, they could not support something they felt was detrimental to their daughters and sons. As strong, independent women, they could not support a show that sends a negative message about women.

The two women from this cohort who watched the shows, Nan and Sara, focused on experience-related enjoyment rather than message-related enjoyment. According to Nan and
Sara, the experience of watching the shows led to laughter, feelings of lightness, and an easing of worries. Sara, said, “When I watch, I don’t really think too much about what is happening, I just kind of zone out and that’s nice. I enjoy laughing and watching something that ridiculous. I don’t think too much about what’s actually going on.”

In the follow-up interview with Sara, I asked if she felt any conflict regarding her enjoyment of the show and her negative feelings about the show’s messages:

I guess they’re at odds. I can’t really explain why I enjoy it so much. I guess it’s just the way it makes me feel. It really doesn’t make me feel bad. I know it’s bad and if I had to describe it to someone then it makes it even more obvious that it’s bad but when I’m watching I don’t get too bogged down in that. I just enjoy it. I just enjoy laughing about it and shaking my head, thinking to myself, ‘They did what?’ I don’t watch the show thinking, ‘Oh, this is terrible.’ I watch and just relax. I have a lot of things to think about and worry about and this just isn’t one of them. It’s just for fun.”

Although Sara felt strongly about the messages and content, she still enjoyed the shows because of the way they made her feel. Humor was a key component in Sara’s response to the shows, as well as the shows’ “far-fetched nature.” For Sara, the shows did not represent a serious portrayal of life or of the roles expected of “real women.” Thus, Sara focused on her affective response, letting go of the cognitive assessments that might undercut the pleasure she experienced from viewing.

In contrast, the other women from the older cohort were unable to enjoy the shows because of the discrepancy between their personal values and the values presented on the show, including their roles as strong women and mothers and their Christian identities.
Middle Age Women

“I’m probably killing brain cells but I still enjoy watching.”

Similar to the older cohort, the middle age women who enjoyed the clips and enjoyed watching these shows did not respond positively to the shows’ messages. The women repeatedly expressed concern for their daughters and other young women who were growing up exposed to sexualized representations of women, questioning the overall message a woman like Kim Kardashian sends to young girls. Sam, 35, the one woman in the group without children and with no immediate plans to have any, was the only one who did not cite concern for younger women as an anxiety-inducing aspect of watching this type of programming. In fact, she said, “I guess it might bother me more if I had a daughter but I just don’t think about those types of things, especially not while I’m watching TV. I don’t think these shows are for younger girls and they’re going to be inundated in it anyway so…what can we really do about it?” Sam was critical of the message the shows send to women in general but was resigned to the lessons it might teach a young girl.

The middle age women used the term “love/hate” to describe how they interacted with the shows used in this study and other similar reality shows. They loved them because they provided enjoyment and an escape but hated the shows’ message. For most of the middle age women, however, enjoyment outweighed their negative feelings. Sam, 35, said, “I have a love/hate relationship with reality TV and shows like these. I really feel like I become stupider every time I watch. But I can’t stop watching them because it’s just fascinating. It’s addictive. I always watch the ones that are completely bizarre. Even though it’s a terrible message, I still enjoy it because it makes me laugh.” When asked what message was being sent and why it was “terrible,” Sam explained that it teaches women to place too much value
on their bodies and sexuality and that it works to devalue other characteristics that should be more important to women, such as inner-beauty and intelligence.

Marty, 28, who watched both shows regularly, expressed anxiety over her ability to enjoy a show that goes against her values and beliefs: “These shows make me feel disappointed. It makes me feel like…why do they need to do that? Why do they feel they need to do that? I just don’t understand it, but I watch it and I actually enjoy it. I guess I don’t let myself think too much about it while I’m watching but if I stop and think about it then it makes me feel a little bit sick, but I still watch.”

Penny, 36, agreed: “It is weird. I definitely don’t support posing naked or selling my body for money but I like watching the girls because they’re funny and their lifestyle is so insane. It’s so different from anything I know.”

This group, more than any other, expressed feelings of conflict over their ability to enjoy the shows even in light of their lack of support of the show’s content and message, specifically the women’s use of sex to sell themselves, gain monetary reward, and advance their careers.

Marty tried to explain this dilemma in her follow-up interview:

There’s almost like this nagging feeling going on while I’m watching that’s trying to tell me….stop! This is bad, but I just ignore it. I guess that’s why people call it a love/hate relationship. I know I should hate it, but I don’t. I don’t know if I’d say that I love it but I definitely enjoy watching for some odd reason. I guess I’m just curious. I don’t know. It should bother me more than it does … I definitely feel that it should bother me more. I just ignore that voice in my head though.
The women’s lack of agreement with the message but enjoyment of the show goes against past findings that suggested viewers of reality TV were more likely to enjoy messages and content they agreed with (Nabi, et al., 2003). In this case, the women are pulled into shows where the content goes against the facets of their identity that are most salient, for example, their role as strong, independent women, their role as mothers to protect their daughters, their role as “good” women who care about values, standards, and morals.

In sum, the middle age women focused on the feelings they experienced when they watched and less on the messages the shows conveyed. When asked how they felt when watching the shows, the women who watched regularly used words such as “relaxed,” “zoned-out,” “happy,” “entertained,” and “carefree.” The feelings of conflict seemed to come when the women talked about the shows or when they thought about younger women watching the shows, not when they were in the act of watching the shows themselves. The women were able to separate the feelings they had about the message from the actual experience of watching.

**Young Women**

“I love watching. It cracks me up.”

Most of the young women enjoyed the shows’ content, were less concerned than the older women regarding the message, and enjoyed the experience of watching the shows. The younger women were less likely than the older women to express feelings of conflict regarding the shows’ overall message and their ability to enjoy the shows, with more of them watching and enjoying the shows on a regular basis. When asked what message was being sent by the shows, the younger women were more varied than the two older groups in their responses. For example, Lena, 21, said, “The shows are about successful women who are
making their mark. They know what they want and they work hard to get it. That’s what it’s about. That’s what they’re about.”

April, 20, said, “The shows portray the day-to-day lives of women who are doing the things that are important to them. They are making choices that they feel good about and it seems like they’re having fun doing it. That’s what the show focuses on.”

In contrast, Addie, 18, was not supportive of the shows’ messages and experienced anxiety when watching the clips during the focus group: “This is terrible. These shows are all terrible. They portray women as bimbos who have nothing to offer except their bodies. The young girl Lacey -- she’s only 15 -- and she’s already emulating the other women. This is not something I would ever watch. I think the message sucks, it’s terrible.”

Levels of enjoyment varied for the women who watched regularly versus the women who watched occasionally. Enjoyment levels were highest for women who watched regularly and categorized reality TV as one of their favorite genres. For the women who watched occasionally, the viewing experience was more about passing time and less about developing a connection with the reality TV women.

According to Jes, 18, “I’ll watch it if there is nothing else on and that’s what I like about it. You can kind of just pick it up wherever and still be entertained. But still it’s just only entertaining because there is nothing else to do and there’s no…like after you watch it you don’t feel like you’ve done anything with your time, at least in my case. It’s like killing time. There is no depth to the characters or the story. It’s empty entertainment.”

Many of the women in this cohort claimed they watched the shows just to fill time, explaining that they enjoy the shows but only on a surface level. Some of the young women described their enjoyment and/or the shows as “trivial,” “insignificant,” “unimportant,” and
“inconsequential.” The women who fell into this category were not concerned with the messages of the shows and explained that they did not think too hard about what they were watching because it was not important to them. They were able to enjoy a moment here or there catching up with the women from the shows but they did not watch enough to feel any type of connection or invest much thought or emotion in their response to the shows.

Some young women described tactics for avoiding critical analysis of the shows’ messages. Heather focused on the humor of the shows’ content, the beauty of the women portrayed, and downplayed the shows’ messages:

It’s just funny. I guess the whole me not approving of the Playboy industry, like, there’s nothing that I can really do if I don’t approve of that but the show is kind of interesting and very funny…that these girls are there and that they’re real people. And it’s not like they’re prostitutes and people are like you have to do this or I’m going to kill you. They’re just like, “OK. I want to make money and I’m really pretty so ….” And pretty people can go a long way. Beautiful people are more successful. I just kind of have to accept that.”

For the young women, enjoyment was based on a variety of components. The women’s involvement with the shows, i.e., how invested they were in watching the shows regularly and how engaged they were when they watched influenced their level of enjoyment. For the women who did not agree with the shows’ messages then they either adopted tactics that moved the focus away from the shows’ messages to other things like the shows’ humor, the personalities of the women from the shows, and the novelty of celebrity lifestyles, or they avoided the shows altogether because in one woman’s words, “I just don’t enjoy that type of stuff.”
Conclusions re: Enjoyment

The women’s explanations as to why they enjoyed or did not enjoy shows that feature overt displays of sexualized self-presentation varied across cohorts and viewing habits. The women who watched a lot of reality TV were more open to the shows’ messages and were more likely to experience pleasure while watching. As was seen in the section on media selection, many of the women selected reality shows that feature overtly sexualized content because they wanted to escape from the everyday pressures of their day-to-day lives. These women expressed a desire to escape -- their interaction with the shows was light-hearted and unquestioning, exemplified with descriptors such as “zoning out” or “vegging out.” The desire for an escape was cited most frequently by the women in the two older groups who watched the shows regularly. The younger women focused more on relaxation and a desire to be entertained during down time or short breaks in their day-to-day lives. They also were more likely to relate personally to the reality TV women.

The overarching desire to escape and relax allowed for an interaction with the shows that was based on pleasure rather than judgment. In other words, the women were able to look past the shows’ messages and focus on the pleasure of the viewing experience, because they wanted to, in one woman’s words, “take a break from thinking.” For the younger women who enjoyed the shows, they either enjoyed and supported the shows’ messages or were able to frame the messages in a postfeminist light, focusing on individual choice and personal definitions of power and success.

Enjoyment was possible for the women who were able to separate their own values, standards, and morals from what was presented on the shows. The women who fell into this category experienced enjoyment through message avoidance. For example, the women in the
two older cohorts who watched the shows regularly articulated a negative cognitive assessment of the shows but explained that they ignored this assessment focusing instead on the way they felt when they watched. For most of these women, avoidance tactics were adopted so they could continue to enjoy the experience of watching the shows, although most expressed some anxiety over this contradiction.

For a small group of young women enjoyment was more of a balance between the cognitive, affective and behavioral. Six young women who participated in the study interacted with the shows positively on all levels. They experienced pleasure in seeing overtly sexualized presentations of self, they agreed with the shows’ messages (i.e., that it is empowering and progressive for women to use their sexuality and physical attributes to get ahead in life), they identified with the women from the shows on various levels, and they felt the shows presented an acceptable, albeit glamorous, picture of the women’s realities. The young women who embraced the shows experienced enjoyment through message validation as well as the actual viewing experience. These young women experienced enjoyment without conflict and communicated the greatest connection to the shows and the shows’ characters, suggesting that they have adopted a worldview similar to the one presented by the shows.

For another small group of women across cohorts, enjoyment was not possible. The three main reasons these women responded negatively to the show was disagreement with the shows’ messages, skepticism regarding the shows’ realism, and the assessment that the shows represent a soft version of pornography, which they felt is harmful to society and harmful to women. The women who responded negatively to the clips were less likely to enjoy reality TV as a whole, watched less TV than any of the other women, and expressed
strong convictions related to personal morals, values and standards, as well as their roles as “good” women. Many of these women were mothers who felt it was their duty to teach their children to value women and to develop a strong sense of self-worth. They were also young women who aspired to become mothers and wives and had distinct ideas about what traits are representative of a “respectable woman,” a good mother and a good wife. Additionally, most of these women were resolute in their definitions of empowerment and identified the clips and the women from the clips as giving up power.

**Sexualized Culture**

This section deals with how women from the focus groups responded to seeing women from popular reality TV shows use their sexuality as a tool to succeed in life. The shows used for this study present examples of women embracing a highly sexualized culture and using their bodies to gain monetary success and wield what they consider power. This section focused on how women across generations interacted with the sexualized nature of the shows, exploring perceptions of what they consider acceptable expressions of sexuality and power, as well as their response to popular cultures’ current focus on sexualized content.

The women’s shock, lack of shock, or acceptance of the sexualized nature of popular culture and the TV shows used in this study shed light on their feelings about overt sex-as-power imagery and the ways in which they interact with women who embrace overt sexuality as an acceptable means for achieving success. According to Kupfermann (1996), every sphere of popular culture has been infiltrated by pornography and there is scarcely an image, form of entertainment, fashion or advertisement not affected. McNair (2002) called the infiltration of sexualized images the “pornographication of the mainstream,” suggesting that “if the trend was clearly evident by the mid-1990s it has continued and intensified in the
intervening period” (p. 61). The sexualization of culture was an important topic of discussion across generations.

**Older Women**

“It’s sad that nothing is kept private.”

The older women expressed concern that images infused with pornography were everywhere and that there are no boundaries when it comes to female sexual expression. This concern caused the older women to feel uneasy because they felt sexual expression should be reserved for someone special and not something to put on display for the world to see. The older women agreed with Freedland’s (2000) suggestion that “The greatest crime of the new pornographers is theft” and that they are “stealing what should be a private, even spiritual part of the human experience and turning it into a commodity” (p. 57).

Nan, 56, said, “Why are these women showing all of this to everyone?” The belief that this type of borderline pornographic expression, such as Lacey posing provocatively with snakes or Kim posing naked for *Playboy*, should be private was a common sentiment of the older women. As they watched the clips, the women who were unfamiliar with the shows experienced them as a form of traditional heterosexist pornography.

Becky, 48, said, “I turn on the TV and see this stuff everywhere….*Playboy*, sex tapes, posing with snakes. It’s everywhere. I’m just so surprised that women are constantly putting this out there. They don’t keep anything private anymore. They’re embracing porn.”

Sara, similarly, said: “It’s sad that nothing is kept private. They are rewarded for flaunting their bodies, selling sex and they don’t mind doing it. It’s for attention, for money, for fame, but what about keeping some of this stuff private?” Kelly, 52, also thought the
images were too much, saying: “These young women need to keep something sacred. I just can’t imagine wanting that to be what people think of me. It’s too much.”

The older women emphasized that they viewed sex and their sexuality as a private and sacred part of their identities and not something that should be molded to fit popular culture’s standard. Most of the older women were critical of the images, inserting a distance between themselves and the women in the shows. They viewed the women from the clips as fulfilling a masquerade of equality. The reality TV women felt they were presenting themselves as strong, independent, sexy, and in control, however, the older women viewed this as a façade. The success the women achieved, including their monetary success and celebrity status, were described by the older women as “dishonorable,” “unworthy,” “disgraceful,” and “degrading.” The women’s negative responses to the clips were blamed primarily on the sexualized nature of the content.

The older women who had never seen the shows used for this study were shocked by them. These women explained that they were much more discerning in their choices of programming and as a whole watched minimal reality television. The women who responded negatively to the clips watched reality shows like American Idol and Dancing with the Stars, but did not watch anything they could relate to the shows used in this study. Their responses suggest that they are much more sensitive to seeing overtly sexualized content than the women who watch this type of programming, as they expressed shock rather than acceptance.

The women who responded negatively to the clips repeatedly spoke of boundaries and the degree to which these boundaries are being pushed in popular culture, as well as in real life. Cindy, 48, said, “Seeing this stuff bothers me. Life does have boundaries. I think
that we are held to a higher, should hold ourselves to a higher standard, and that young girls wearing the *Playboy* logo, then to me the message is that I don’t have those boundaries or I choose to cross that boundary and that’s disappointing and sad to me.”

Kelly, 52, said, “Come on! I think there has to be some people to say this has gone far enough. We need to have some boundaries here. Otherwise, if the message is just to do whatever feels good, if this is going to continue to go on and on and on, my goodness guys, where will it go? What does this say about us as women? We’re objects.”

The women who experienced strong negative reactions did not watch the shows and were not able to enjoy them on any level. They felt shocked, saddened, and even angered by the way the women on the shows portrayed themselves. Mel, 45, said, “I thought it was awful. But you know what … I think this episode in particular would draw a lot of attention because sex sells, or booties, or nakedness, whatever, it sells. Unfortunately, I think a lot of people watch it because of that, but it just doesn’t interest me. It’s our society that’s to blame.”

Becky, 48, also commented on the centrality of sex in the shows, calling them “trash:”

It’s about sex. Everything is about sex these days. I think Kim Kardashian is known for sex, it’s a sexual thing. All of them are displaying it. It’s obvious in how they carry themselves, how they present themselves, how they dress. That episode, I don’t know what other episodes are like, but I’m assuming that when they’re out in public they’re drawing in men probably by using their bodies. I mean, the other girls are already posing like they know their sister is, pulling their pants down, the mom is
dressing…look at her, she’s hanging everything out. It’s a very sexual show. It’s pretty shocking actually.”

The older women blamed “society” for the sexualized nature of popular culture. Cindy, 48, said: “Society is what feeds it. That’s what society is. The reason she [Kim Kardashian] is what she is is because sex sells. People like the shock factor. They’re going out to younger people than we are -- that’s why it’s successful.”

Sara and Nan were the two exceptions in this cohort. Both women watched the shows even though they disagreed with the sexualized nature of the content and the sexualized personas the reality TV women presented. They were able to enjoy the shows even though they viewed them as somewhat shameful. Sara, who watched the shows on a regular basis, described an ability to separate her negative feelings about overtly sexualized content from her ability to watch and find pleasure in shows like Keeping up with the Kardashians and The Girls Next Door. Sara admitted to being desensitized to the sexualized nature of the shows. She said, “I know I should feel more strongly about this stuff but I just don’t. When we’re sitting here talking about it, I can say it’s bad and that it sends a bad message, but I have to be honest…I’m just not that phased by it.”

Nan, 56, said, “Well, the thing about these reality shows is that the shock factor has to be so great and they have to go over the top, over the top, over the top to where we’ve just kind of become immune. Some things that used to shock, now it’s like ho hum, OK. It’s a shame that we’ve gotten to that point.”

Sara described feeling resigned to accept the sexualization of culture, stating, “It’s everywhere. It’s society. It sells. You know, it’s not going anywhere. You might as well just get used to it.”
In sum, the majority of the women from this group expressed shock after viewing the clips and fixated on how the sexualization of culture has negative ramifications for women and for society as a whole. The women who responded to the clips with shock and disappointment attributed the problem to pressures of society and felt pity and shame for the young women who embraced overt self-sexualization. The two women who were more comfortable with the images presented in the clips were admittedly desensitized to them, acknowledging exploitative aspects of self-sexualization but holding back judgment because of a level of acceptance that according to Sara can be summed up as “just the way things are.” As a whole, the older women were the least accepting of the sexualized nature of society than any other cohort.

**Middle Age Women**

“I guess this is what it means to be sexy these days. What can you do?”

The middle age women were not as shocked by the images as the women from the older group. Even though they were not shocked by the images, the middle age women expressed varying degrees of confusion and apprehension over the messages the clips send regarding sexual identity, choice, and objectification. Although each of the women from the clips [Kim Kardashian, Holly, Bridget and Kendra, and Lacey] expressed the sentiment that they possessed power in relation to their sexuality, the middle age women did not buy it. Instead of reading this display of sexuality as a form of power, the middle age women viewed it as a type of exploitation. In contrast to the older group, who focused heavily on the shocking nature of the images, this group focused on the underlying aspects of exploitation that permeate reality shows featuring overtly sexualized content. The middle age women described varying degrees of desensitization to sexualized imagery but also communicated an
awareness of a perceptible shift in the degree to which women are taking part in their own self-sexualization.

Marty, 28, said, “Things have changed. You just didn’t see this type of stuff when I was growing up. There’s nothing I can compare it to.”

Sam, 35, also commented on how things have changed: “Reality TV was just starting when we were teenagers. I think The Real World started when I was almost twenty. Now there are all these girls who sleep around and think that sex is all that matters. You never would have seen anything like The Girls Next Door when we were growing up. It just wasn’t there.”

Penny, 36, said, “I was probably shocked by this stuff a few years ago but I’m not anymore. It’s everywhere but I guess it catches me off guard sometimes, how it’s basically exploiting women. The only difference is that women are choosing it now. They eat it up. It’s not their only option but they actually seem to enjoy it.”

The middle age women focused less on the infiltration of pornography into popular culture and more on the overall shift from women being objectified to women objectifying themselves through self-sexualization while calling it empowerment. The middle age women also identified a shift from women choosing to embrace a sexualized persona to attract male attention to women choosing to embrace a sexualized persona to attract female attention.

Sam, 35, said, “You would think these shows are produced for men but they’re not. This stuff is for women. That’s what gets me. I watch it and I enjoy it….a show about Playboy. It’s not for men at all. It’s for women now and that’s weird to me.”

Marty, 28, also wondered why women enjoy it: “It’s interesting to think about. Why do women watch? I mean, I watch….but why? If you’d asked me a few years ago if I’d ever
watch a show about someone posing for Playboy then I’d say absolutely not. It’s so mainstream now. It makes it harder to be critical of it.”

Content that in the past was created for male pleasure is now being embraced by female audiences, and positions female audiences to withhold criticism.

Marty, 28, said, “I’m not a prude. I feel like this stuff is bad for women but then again I don’t want to be that person who is saying being sexy is bad. I guess there’s just something about these shows that make it feel ok. I watch the shows and I enjoy them so I’m definitely embracing it on some level. Something about it is enjoyable.” When asked what “it” is, Marty responded, “I guess I’m embracing the idea that it’s OK to use your body to be successful. It’s ok to make that what’s important. It’s not that I do that in my real life but I’m supporting shows that send the message that being sexy and superficial is the most important thing.” Marty’s comments suggest that women today are being positioned (and feel pressure) to embrace sexualized images as forms of sexual agency.

Even though the middle age women were desensitized to the images and felt pressure to withhold judgment, they still questioned the underlying messages overtly sexualized content conveys about women. For the middle age women, the self-sexualization of Kim Kardashian and the women from The Girls Next Door as empowerment and agency reinforced the association between self-esteem and a superficial physicality, a message that was at odds with their definitions of what it means to be a strong, independent woman.

In sum, the women from this group expressed concern that overtly sexualized images, like the ones seen in the clips, occur within a social structure in which women are valued for presenting a sexualized appearance, which is only deemed desirable and attractive if it conforms to narrowly defined standards. According to Durham (2008) “The midriff-baring
seductiveness of today’s pop culture stars is framed in terms of liberation and power. But a closer look at the imagery would reveal that only certain kinds of bodies are positioned as sexual, and only certain types of sexual display count as desirable—and that desirability is still very much a matter of appealing to a traditionally defined male gaze, despite the fact that most of the audiences for these images are female” (p. 34). The middle age women were quick to pick up on this; describing the different ways sexualized images in reality TV work to exploit women, limit sexual expression, and place added pressure on all women to conform to something that does not feel natural to them.

**Young Women**

As a whole, the youngest cohort was much more accepting of the sex-as-power imagery and most did not flinch at the overt displays of sexuality. The young women could be divided into three distinct interpretations when it came to how they responded to this type of sexual power and how they engaged with it. Their responses shed light on their views of sexuality, power, and femininity and what they see as appropriate and acceptable self-presentations of women.

Six young women embraced the sex-as-power imagery and experienced it as a form of agency. Fourteen young women, although not surprised by it, were not as accepting of the overt sex-as-power imagery when it came to their own lives, but were adamant about not judging other women for choosing this lifestyle. These young women felt they understood why others might choose this path and did not fault them, but they were clear that it would not be something they would choose for themselves. Eight young women felt sex-as-power-imagery was degrading to all women and ultimately a form of disguised sexism. They were
not shocked by the images but felt they were detrimental to the women portrayed on the shows, as well as to all women, and not something they could support.

**Interpretation 1:** “These women are playing the game. They’ve figured it out.”

Six young women enjoyed seeing the overt-sex-as-power imagery and felt there was nothing wrong with it. The young women who responded positively to the overtly sexualized images supported what Levy (2005) described as the “female chauvinist pig” -- a woman who asks: “Why throw your boyfriend’s *Playboy* in a freedom trashcan when you could be partying at the Mansion? Why worry about disgusting or degrading when you could be giving – or getting – a lap dance yourself? Why try to beat them when you can join them?” (Levy, 2005, p. 93).

Ellen, 20, said:

I think women have gained a lot of power as sexual people, you know, being sexy and having a sexy image gives you power and I think that people learned that and that’s why there are so many like Kim Kardashian. You know, if you pose for *Playboy* you are not going to be condemned for it because that’s her source of power. And that power is influence – influence over people and especially men. I don’t see a problem with that. That’s what being sexy is about. I think it works for a lot of women.

Young women in this sub-group described the women’s sexuality in the clips as “powerful,” “classy,” “influential,” and “strong.” The young women who embraced this form of sexualized power were supportive of the reality TV women and their involvement with *Playboy.*
Eve, 20, said:

I think it’s a good thing to use your sexuality like that. I do view *Playboy* and pornography completely different. I wouldn’t say it’s the same thing as someone making pornographic tapes, but to me *Playboy* is completely different. It’s like, it’s explicit but in a decent way. I think that is what sexy is about these days. That’s what it means to be sexy. I wouldn’t feel bad about posing for *Playboy*. It’s not taboo anymore.

Kris, 20, agreed: “Yea, compared to other things it [*Playboy*] is pretty classy and there’s nothing wrong with posing. They are beautiful, so why not?”

The women who embraced this type of sexual power expressed that control is the central element to owning one’s sexuality and gaining power over others by using that sexuality. As Erin, 22, said: “In the *Playboy* situation, for Kim and for those other women [from *The Girls Next Door*], they’re totally in control. I think it’s a good thing to be able to use your sexuality like that, when you’re in charge of it.”

The young women were clear in their assertions that when women choose to use their sexuality to further their careers then they are in control, therefore differentiating self-sexualization from objectification. The young women embraced the reality TV women’s use of their bodies and their brains to advance their careers.

Erin explained why she supports “self-sexualization,” “They are strong women, making decisions to further their careers and, good for them, they’re successful and they did that on their own. Sex is a tool and they are using it to the full extent and I think that’s OK. If I looked like that then I’d take advantage of it, too.”
Kris, 20, said:

I kind of feel like it’s that own person’s prerogative. It’s that own person’s decision and some of us, you know, I hate to say it, but some of us were born with these things that automatically give us an advantage in life and who is to say you can’t use that? If someone says, “Well, I’m going to show a little cleavage here just to get the men to look long enough so they can see I have a brilliant idea,” then I don’t really think we should say that’s bad.”

Some of the young women felt the reality TV women had more power than most people would suspect, arguing that the reality TV women’s ability to shape and manipulate their images was a source of empowerment for them.

Ellen, 20, said:

I feel like what they’re doing is empowering especially considering what it meant to be, like you know, where we might have been as females 50 years ago. I mean, sexuality would never be exposed like that on television. And so if a woman really does believe that her sexuality is something she really cares about, then it is empowering for her to display it on television in whatever way she wants.

Thus, Ellen, and the other women from this group, felt that what they viewed on the clips signified an advance for women in regards to expressing sexuality. These young women also felt a sexualized persona can be a good career move for women.

Lena, 21, said:

Good for them. That’s a role that needs to be filled and if they’re the people to do it, then good. I mean, it seems that they’re good at their jobs and it’s a thriving business and it’s not like they’re tearing it down from the insides because they’re so dumb.
They’re obviously capable of doing something besides pose naked but this is what they want to do. These women are playing the game. They’ve figured it out.

When asked to explain what the women have figured out, Lena responded, “They’ve figured out how to use what they have to gain success and get somewhere in life. They look like they’re having a great time….who wouldn’t want the cars and the fame and the money?”

The young women who supported the women’s use of their sexuality to get ahead felt the reality TV women were taking control of their lives, rather than giving up control. These young women focused on the concept of personal control and how important it is for modern women to take control of their lives.

Anna, 22, said:

It’s all about control, just us as females saying, ‘We are going to start taking control of our bodies, control of our futures, control of our lifestyles.’ We’re not going to allow men or society or anyone else to tell us how we’re going to live. That mentality plays into Kim’s lifestyle and her decision to pose for *Playboy* because it says, ‘I’m in control and I can make decisions for myself and if I want to be sexy then I can be sexy.’ Women today are becoming more self-asserted and that’s why we see so much of this.

The young women’s descriptions of control and power and their responses to the reality TV women speak to their own beliefs on what it means to be a powerful woman. Often discussed as a postfeminist attribute or theme, sexual objectification is freely chosen by active, confident, assertive female subjects (Gill, 2003). In this case, the young women do not view the reality TV women’s sexualized personas as examples of objectification but,
rather, as subjectification. In other words, the young women see the reality TV women as knowing, active, desiring subjects instead of sexual objects.

Scholars have identified a recent shift from sexual objectification to sexual subjectification in the media and popular culture (Gill, 2003; Coy & Garner, 2010). Sexual-subjectification has been described by Gill (2008) as “new constructions of gendered subjectivities,” which are successful because they feature “young, attractive, heterosexual women who knowingly and deliberately play with their sexual power and are always ‘up for it’ (that is, sex)” (p. 41). It is interesting to note, however, that the young women who embraced self-sexualization as power did not connect a sexualized persona to having sex.

Erin, 22, said, “I personally think it’s OK to have fun with your image and push the boundaries a little when it’s appropriate. It doesn’t mean I’m going to go out and have sex with anyone. I can be sexy and confident. It’s fun to play that part.” When I asked Erin what constitutes an appropriate situation to “push the boundaries,” she responded, “When I go out I like to dress up and show off a little. When I’m going out with my girlfriends we like to get ready together and sometimes we decide we’re going sexy, but then everyone has to do it.” I also asked Erin if she could explain what she meant by “It’s fun to play that part,” she said, “You know, it’s just one aspect of who I am. It’s OK to focus on being feminine sometimes and other times I can be more conservative. It’s fun to change things up and do things that don’t necessarily fit with all the other sides.”

Throughout the discussion, the young women’s comments spoke to the degree to which pornography has seeped into mainstream culture and the normalization of images that in the past were taboo. With comments such as, “I kind of disassociate the Playboy brand from pornography” and “Playboy is just Playboy…it’s not pornography at all,” we see a type
of disassociation encouraged by the ubiquitous nature of sexualized images of women and
the everyday incorporation of pornographic elements in mainstream imagery. The young
women did not flinch at reality TV’s over-the-top portrayal of sexualization and, in fact,
embraced it as an acceptable and even central facet of a successful woman’s identity.

In the words of Ellen, 20, “To me, everything has always been kind of
hypersexualized. Growing up with that culture, I’m just kind of completely desensitized to it.
To the point where I don’t even notice or I’m not even offended by the fact that the girls have
giant fake boobs.”

Anna, 22, said:
To be honest, I feel like I’ve become numb to it. Had I watched this a couple of years
ago, I probably would have been appalled. I would have thought the girls were sluts
and I probably wouldn’t have watched. We see it so much now and especially since
I’ve been in college. It just isn’t a big deal. So, I can watch and enjoy it and laugh.
It’s funny. It just seems normal now.

The young women who were comfortable with and open to sexualized portrayals of
women were able to enjoy watching shows like the ones used in this study. They recognize
that the key element of the women from the clips success is the sexualization of self and
body – framed by these young women as successful entrepreneurship and regarded as an
example of female agency. The young women who embraced self-sexualization interacted
with the text in a completely different way than the women who were shocked or appalled by
what they viewed. Many of the young women who were accepting of this type of lifestyle
and portrayal laughed out loud during the viewing of the clips. According to Coy and Garner
(2010) “Some young women perceive that a positive self-identity can be built on reclaiming
the sexualized portrayals that modern feminism has sought to challenge” (p. 658). Based on
the comments of the young women who responded positively to overt sex-as-power imagery,
they are more open to other shows and media outlets with similar content and have adopted a
worldview that actively embraces, celebrates, and enjoys sexualized portrayals.

**Interpretation 2: “It’s not for me but if they’re comfortable with it, then go for it!”**

Fourteen young women did not support the use of sexuality as a form of power as a
means to gaining success but did not judge other women for using their sexuality to get ahead
in life. The largest number of young women fell into this category, supporting a woman’s
right to choose her own path in life and resisting judgment when it comes to self-
sexualization as a form of empowerment. These women felt it was each woman’s individual
choice and that while there was nothing wrong with making this choice, it would probably
not be one they would make for themselves.

The young women discussed “choice” in relation to Kim Kardashian’s decision to
pose for *Playboy*. Jill, 22, said, “I think it’s a personal decision. I’m not opposed to it. I
mean, I would never do it but I wouldn’t judge someone if they did do it.” Ali, 21, said, “It’s
Kim’s decision whether or not she wants to pose for *Playboy*. Who am I to tell her that’s
bad?”

Most of the young women supported other women’s right to choose how to present
themselves and how to define power, control, and success. They viewed the reality TV
women as having control and making active choices regarding the portrayal of their sexuality
and using that sexuality to wield power. They did not fault other women for making this
decision even though it was not central to their own identities.
According to Carly, 20:

I don’t think there’s anything wrong with going out and doing something to make yourself feel good, to feel sexy. If you’re doing it for yourself then it is your choice. I don’t think I’d pose for Playboy, it’s just not my thing, but I think it’s a good choice for a lot of other women who feel comfortable and feel sexy.”

April, 20, agreed:

It’s totally up to them. They are choosing to be on the show and they have control over it. The most important point is that they are choosing it and creating their own image and they have control. They might be objectifying themselves but it is their own desire to do it and that gives them the power. It’s not my definition of sexy. I couldn’t do that but I don’t fault them for doing it because it’s their choice.

Only young women supported a woman’s desire to choose this type of success. The majority of the young women were not willing to pass judgment on it, such as Karen, 21, who said, “For women in general, what they chose to do is just that -- their choice. I mean, I don’t think it’s demeaning to other women.”

Similarly, Jo, 20, said, “If they’re making a choice then they aren’t being exploited. I don’t think they’re being exploited, because, you know, if that’s what they want to do then that’s just fine.”

Heather, 18, also supported choice, explaining why Lacey from My Super Sweet 16 made the choices she did,

She [Lacey] was very, like, sexual and she wanted sexy pictures of herself and she wanted to be half naked walking in and, um, I think she just wanted to get attention. It was just that whole objectifying herself to get attention. I don’t know if she thinks
that is expected of her, like, for her to be popular cause if she wants to have the best party and she wants people to go and she probably wants to be like the celebrities. And all the celebrities are really, like, hot and sexy and that’s how they get attention and she wants guys to like her. I mean, she’s 16, of course she wants guys to like her and that’s what she sees, so I guess it makes sense. It’s how she chooses to get attention. That’s her right.

The women who supported this idea of choice also focused on the idea that all women have the right to shape their own lives. Individuality was a key identity concept to these women. The women from this group did not feel that another woman’s choice affected them.

Ideas of choice and freedom are central to contemporary notions of individuality. According to Harris (2004), discourses of individuality play on many ideals of feminist thinking – with a focus on young women’s opportunities for choice, individual empowerment, personal responsibility, and the ability to “be what you want to be” (p.8). The women from the focus groups who supported choice also supported Beck’s (1992) notion of life as a personal project, or a “choice biography” – crafted as one desires and not set or fixed by a predictable path (p. 135). The majority of the young women supported this idea of personal choice, voicing their belief and support of other women’s sexual agency, which was primarily an aesthetic choice, as a legitimate source of power. The young women who fell into this group were not willing to criticize or demean other women’s choices even when they did not personally subscribe to them.

Dow (1996) suggests that postfeminist rhetoric “produces postfeminist thought’s most powerful framing device: patriarchy is gone and has been replaced by choice, resulting
in several premises that create the postfeminist worldview” (p. 95). Similarly, McKenna (2006) suggests: “Feminist cultural studies have been concerned with how television constructs female consumer pleasures through the appeal of lifestyle aesthetics” and that it is not uncommon to see the postfeminist backlash linked to “a consumer driven commercial lib that simultaneously stresses highly sexualized beauty ideals and increasingly unrealistic body norms” (p. 58). Mckenna draws attention to the contradiction between “Feminist principles such as professional gender equality and the individualizing emphasis on feminine looks and sexualized beauty” as well as “sexual objectification and the male gaze,” suggesting that postfeminist television is characterized by its maintenance of traditional feminine boundaries with an emphasis on sexual agency as an aesthetic choice (McKenna, 2006, p. 59).

In sum, the young women were the only group that focused heavily on “choice,” magnifying the relationship between individualism, choice, and empowerment prevalent in younger generations. The majority of the younger women’s responses supported the postfeminist notion that choice is individual and empowerment is self-defined. The majority of young women, 14 of 24, did not fault the reality TV women for choosing the “Playboy lifestyle” or for making the choice to objectify and sexualize themselves to gain success. The choices women make and their definitions of power and success are seen as individual.

**Interpretation 3:** “I just don’t approve of the industry. It’s, like, porn-light.”

Eight young women were against women using their sexuality to gain and wield power. Described as “disgraceful,” “appalling,” “demeaning,” “disgusting,” “shameful,” and “unfortunate,” the reality TV women’s lifestyle choices were not acceptable to these women. In contrast to the women who embraced this display of overt sexuality as power, this group did not see the reality TV women as possessing any power, in fact, they felt the women from
the shows gave up all power by making the choice to pose naked, to dress in a highly
sexualized manner, and to use their bodies to gain success.

In contrast to the group that would not choose this lifestyle for themselves but were
unwilling to judge, this group felt that women like Kim Kardashian, the women from The
Girls Next Door and 15-year-old Lacey, were doing a disservice to all women and felt their
decisions affected society in a negative way. In contrast to the older women, who believed
society was to blame for causing the sexualized personas of the women from the shows, the
younger women felt that the women who chose this lifestyle were negatively impacting
society. In other words, the women from this group placed the blame on the reality TV
women for making the choice to present themselves in a sexualized manner and not on
society for rewarding them.

The women who responded negatively to seeing overt displays of sexuality used their
personal belief systems to judge the reality TV women. They were unable to enjoy the
overtly sexualized programming because it strayed too far from their personal beliefs, values
and standards. In addition to contradicting their own values, these women also felt like the
use of sex to sell oneself was detrimental to all women, not only the ones making their
individual choices.

Mary, 20, said, “I think it’s degrading towards women in general to pose for Playboy
because it is sending that message that to get noticed and to gain power and, um, credibility
you have to show your skin and all that stuff.”

Ariana, 20, agreed, “Women using their sexuality as power still kind of gives the
power back to the man in a way, because we’re using…..you don’t really talk about a woman
wooing the guy with their amazing intellect. It’s just sex and women really aren’t in control. I feel like using sexuality like that is still kind of like a loop to a male dominated society.”

The woman who were against the use of sexuality as a form of power focused on morals and self-respect, suggesting that women who have strong morals and who respect themselves would not chose this lifestyle or objectify themselves in this way. The young women compared the decisions the reality TV women made with the way they would make decisions in their own lives and could not reconcile the differences. They described the women as “m Morally corrupt,” “having no values,” and “shady.”

Joselyn, 21, said, “It obviously means they weren’t raised in a home where they learned to think highly of themselves. They don’t have enough self-esteem to think that, like, you can go somewhere and not throw yourself on somebody just to get attention.”

According to Maya, 21, “They give up morality. They might not think so but a lot of people who watch probably think so. They’ve given up their sense of self because it’s being split up into a million pieces and being given to these men who look at these images.”

Mary, 20, said, “The women don’t have any standards, any morals. They’re willing to do anything for fame. It’s sad.”

Addie, 18, had no problem admitting that Kim Kardashian was successful but felt the success was not worthwhile: “She’s making money but she’s not getting it by reasons that are legitimate. She’s not really an actress. She’s not really a singer or a dancer or anything. What skills does she have besides being pretty, other than being a sex symbol? So, does she have long-term success? Not really. It’s something that I personally think is sad.”

The women who shared these feelings judged the women from the clips harshly and emotionally. They expressed their opinions clearly and without reservation. Seven of the
eight women self-identified as being feminist and most had taken at least one women’s studies course. They were clear in their convictions that choosing to express yourself in a sexualized manner was detrimental to women as a group, as well as to society. For these women, the choice to present oneself in such a sexualized manner represents a type of character flaw related to poor self-esteem or superficiality. These women based their opinions of the clips on their own moral principles and personal beliefs and were unable to embrace the lifestyle or images they viewed.

**Conclusions re: Sexualized Culture**

The women who participated in the focus groups interacted with the shows used in this study in varying ways and expressed a range of emotions: shock, disdain, detachment, confusion, acceptance, and approval. The women’s views on the sexualization of culture, and more specifically their level of sensitization to the proliferation of self-sexualized images of women, affected their responses.

According to Gill (2007), sexualization is “the extraordinary proliferation of discourses about sex and sexuality across all media forms….as well as the increasingly frequent erotic presentation of girls’ and women’s bodies in public spaces” (p. 151). The women who expressed low levels of sensitization to sexualization (i.e., they were shocked by the images) were less understanding and more critical of what they viewed. The women who expressed higher levels of sensitization to sexualization (i.e., they were “numb” to the images) were more likely to withhold criticism or accept the sexualized images as forms of empowerment.

Throughout the focus groups, women of all ages discussed the ways they interacted with the sexualized images dominating popular culture. What messages do these images
communicate regarding sexuality – is it one of sexuality as power (i.e., it is a woman’s choice, her body, her clothes, her power), a message of complicity (i.e., women can accept this role as object in exchange for money and/or fame and this is OK because it’s her choice), or a message of exploitation (i.e., Women have no control over their image. They are a pawn of the industry. They have no power.)? The dominant messages embraced by women across groups were mediated by elements of self-concept (i.e., identity constructs), feelings toward reality TV, consumption habits, and levels of sensitization to the proliferation of sexualized imagery in popular culture.

The older women, who were sensitive to seeing women use their bodies for profit as a means to power, were more likely to express shock and viewed the shows as communicating a clear message of exploitation. The middle-aged women were somewhat desensitized to the images, identified underlying elements of exploitation and felt conflict regarding their ability to enjoy a show that promotes a message they disagree with. The young women were desensitized to sexualized images of women, with the majority either accepting the shows’ messages as a positive example of “sexuality as power” or focusing on the importance of individual choice.

The younger women were the only group to focus on a woman’s right to choose her own path to empowerment, often expressing a postfeminist view on empowerment. Gill (2007) argues that although it might be seductive to “respect” other women’s choices and withhold critique, the “individualizing, neoliberal paradigm” promoted through reality TV offers women only the guise of empowerment (p. 72). Themes of female individualization, which is defined by McRobbie (2004) as “a new regime of sexual meanings based on female consent, equality, participation, and pleasure, free of politics,” (p. 260) clearly emerged from
the younger focus groups. Many of the young women embraced the sexualized representations presented on the shows as an enjoyable example of “real” young women shaping, transforming, and working on a self-image that awards them power and control.

For the women of reality TV, successful control over their bodies and their sexuality is gained through consumption, marketing, and discipline. Harvey (1990) suggests that as an ideology of consumption and commodification prevail, we are at risk of experiencing life vicariously without having to make sense of the structures in which cultures are produced, distributed, or experienced. Social structures inform the overtly sexualized images of women prevalent in popular culture and are often built on inequality, injustice, and continued material and ideological inequities (Baker, 2008). For many of the young women, these structures go unnoticed or are largely ignored because the women are positioned to withhold judgment, i.e., they do not want to be considered a “prude” or “uncool.” Baker (2008) suggests that young women’s decision-making processes are influenced by discourses of neoliberalism empowerment, which operate through the semantics of “choice, working to exaggerate women’s advancements and disguise socially generated inequalities” (p. 54).

The women from the two older focus groups saw through the pretext of empowerment and identified the exclusionary nature of the neoliberal mentality, a mentality that promotes self-work, personal responsibility, and consumer choice. The younger women were less critical of the sexualized empowerment paradigm, or what Cog and Garner (2010) refer to as “conspicuous consumption packaged as feminist achievement” (p. 671). The young women were the only ones who embraced the “sexuality as power” messages, and focused more heavily on the message of complicity, supporting a woman’s right to choose the path she views as powerful.
In sum, the women’s responses shed light on how they define sexual agency. Corsianos (2003) defined sexual agency as “the capacity to evaluate and make personal choices for oneself regarding self definitions as a sexual being and personal sexual performances regardless of the external dominant social forces and social consequences” (p. 865). Many of the young women described the reality TV women as possessing sexual agency. They viewed the reality TV women as being in control of their sexuality and actively making the choice to use their sexuality to gain success. The women from the two older cohorts did not describe the reality TV women as possessing sexual agency. In contrast, they identified the women’s “choice” to embrace a sexualized persona in order to gain success as not a choice at all, instead agreeing with Coy and Garner’s (2010) explanation that women who go down this path are “victims of hegemonic gender definitions” (p. 659).

The central element of sex seemed normal to the young women, something that they have come to expect and accept from the TV shows and magazines they enjoy. As a result of being significantly more desensitized to overtly sexualized images than any other cohort, the young women did not identify the sexualized nature of reality TV as setting an unrealistic or unfair expectation for “real” women. They were less likely than the older women to point out the work that goes into maintaining this type of image or the cost that goes into fulfilling this type of sexualized beauty, whether financial, physical, or mental. The younger women also did not point out the health issues surrounding this type of image, i.e. issues such as eating disorders, bulimia, and low self-esteem, which were topics brought up by both of the older cohorts.

The older women categorized the type of sexual attractiveness seen in the clips as something more geared towards men and meant to garner men’s attention, whereas the young
women did not make this distinction. Many of the younger women viewed this type of imagery as something women do for themselves, something they chose for themselves, and not something that is done to them. For these reasons, the young women were less likely to identify self-sexualization as a form of exploitation.

A small number of young women responded negatively, identifying the shows as sexist, exploitative, and harmful to women. These women who were more likely to embrace feminist ideals and had experienced some type of consciousness-raising related to women’s issues. The women who responded negatively relied on resistive ideologies of feminism to counter the hegemonic ideologies of femininity that inform overtly sexualized media messages.

**Conclusions re: Interaction**

According to Attwood (2006) audiences are now granted access to sexually explicit material through a “sophisticated form of presentation” which successfully reaches young female audiences because the representations “connote a new, liberated contemporary sexuality for women; sex is stylish, a source of physical pleasure, a means of creating identity, a form of body work, self-expression, a quest for individual fulfillment” (p. 86). The importance of individual choice and fulfillment repeatedly emerged from the discussions with the young women.

Understanding how the women interact with overt sex-as-power imagery is important for many reasons. The types of shows viewers choose to watch and the ways in which they engage with those shows is believed to impact the influence that media content may have on their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors (Green, Garst, & Brock, 2004; Steele & Brown, 1995).
The women’s interactions with sexualized portrayals of women speak to their definitions of femininity, as well as to what they consider acceptable and desirable roles for women.

Elements of the women’s identities constantly shaped their responses and the ways they interacted with the shows’ content and the reality TV women. According to Steele and Brown (1995) identity anchors the Media Practice Model, “explaining more variation in practice than any other component” (p. 554). This proved true, with elements of motherhood, values and standards, personal definitions of female empowerment, and views on what it means to be a strong, independent, successful woman, shaping the women’s interaction with the shows used in this study. Elements of identity were woven through the three dominant interaction themes: perceived realism, enjoyment, and responses to living in a sexualized culture.

Viewing practices also influenced the women’s interaction with the shows, with heavy viewers describing deeper connections to the women from the shows and engaging in tactics to mask the negative aspects of the shows’ content. Many of the young women did not need to adopt tactics to mask the negative aspects of the shows, because either they agreed with the message (i.e., that a sexualized persona is a powerful example of female agency) or they were desensitized to seeing overt sex-as-power imagery. The young women who disagreed with the message simply did not watch.

Exploring the different ways the women interacted with shows featuring sex-as-power imagery is a critical step in understanding how and when they apply what they view to their own lives. The next section builds on interaction, addressing the application process by focusing on how shows steeped in overtly sexualized representations of women are relevant to women and how they translate to real-life behaviors and beliefs.
CHAPTER 8
APPLICATION

This section focused on how the women in this study applied the overtly sexualized images they see in popular culture, including what they viewed in the clips, to their own lives. Three themes related to application emerged from the focus group discussions and follow-up interviews, including: third-person effect, social comparison, and pressures to conform. Women from all cohorts felt sexualized images affected “other people” more than they affected them, specifically younger women who had not yet experienced life-changing events. Through social comparisons, some women related to the reality TV women while others distanced themselves from them. As a result, the women’s comparisons led to self-evaluation, self-transformation, or feelings of judgment. Women from all cohorts described feelings of pressure, which translated into the adoption or modification of beliefs and behaviors for some.

Third-Person Effect

The women who watched Keeping up with the Kardashians, The Girls Next Door or My Super Sweet 16 on a regular basis were not concerned about the effects sexualized images had on their day-to-day lives. Most of the women from the focus groups felt they were immune to any effects reality TV might have on viewers. Women from all the focus groups expressed concern for others, specifically younger women.
This phenomenon is often described by communication scholars as the “third-person effect,” and refers to situations when people see mass media as more likely to affect others rather than themselves (Davison, 1983). Third-person effects have been applied to a variety of media, including political advertising (Cohen & Davis, 1991), television violence (Hoffner, et al., 2002), and new media (Banning & Sweetser, 2007).

Research suggests that people with higher levels of education are the most prone to experiencing third-person effects (Andsager & White, 2007), and often experience it as a result of self-enhancement tendencies. In other words, people who are educated feel the media they consume does not affect them negatively because they are smart or savvy enough to resist its effects. Other people, who are not as smart, are influenced. Self-enhancement is predicated on the assumption that people work to maintain a positive self-image (Perloff, 2002). Message desirability has been found to influence third-person effects. Research suggests that anti-social messages produce strong third-person effects and that pro-social messages diminish or weaken the third-person effect (Neuwirth & Frederick, 2002).

Perceived self-other differences were discussed by all of the women. The women who identified the potential of a third-person effect perceived personal invulnerability to the negative aspects of the content from the clips, while expressing concern for younger, more naïve, and less educated viewers.

**Older Women**

“It doesn’t affect me so much but I worry about young girls.”

The older women were the most vocal about the effects of sexualized imagery on young women. They viewed younger women as more naïve than older women, more impressionable, and more susceptible to adopting a sexualized persona. They worried that
younger women would adopt the sexualized styles and attitudes presented in the shows although personally they felt immune to any effects from viewing sexualized content. Additionally, the older women felt younger women’s vulnerability to sexualized imagery would translate to risky sexual behaviors and lead to dangerous situations.

According to Mel, 45:

I think younger girls watch these shows to find out what is sexy, to perhaps copy, to emulate because I think they probably think that men are watching it, even if they’re not. My daughter watches it and I tell her to turn it off 20 times, but I can’t watch her 24/7, but not in my house, she won’t watch it. She’s not one of the wannabes, but I see it as something for her, maybe fashion trends, how to do your hair, and that kind of thing. For others it’s about what can you do to make yourself look better and look sexy because sex is what it’s about right now. It’s there, whether it’s right or wrong, it’s there.”

When I asked Mel what she meant by “wannabes,” she explained that many of the young girls who go to school with her daughter look up to celebrities and adopt behaviors that are similar to what they see on TV. These young women do whatever it takes to secure attention from boys, which translates into a sexualized self-presentation. So in Mel’s mind, her daughter might look to the shows for fashion trends and hair styles, while other young women who are “wannabes,” look to shows to find out how to attract male attention through a sexualized persona.

Becky, 48, said: “My thing with having a college daughter, she’s strong, she’s opinionated so I don’t think it would affect her but if you have someone who is 12, 13, 14 or someone who isn’t as strong, and they get a hold of that episode, I’m sure that’s bigger than
life to them and I’m sure that it would affect them.” Becky also discussed her daughter as someone who had been taught to value the important things in life, things like inner-beauty and self-worth as well as the importance of personality, intellect and accomplishment, rather than physical beauty and a sexualized self-presentation. Similar to Mel, Becky also believed that the life-lessons she taught her daughter provided some immunity to the effects of sexualized imagery.

Most of the older women felt middle school and high school-aged girls would be more affected than older women.

Nan, 56, said, “I don’t get much take away from this stuff but I think young girls are watching these shows to get tips. That’s very sad. They’re learning how to be plastic, just how to be plastic really…and sexy.”

The women from this group worried that younger generations were more affected because they did not have the maturity to differentiate between empowerment and exploitation. Cindy, 48, said, “My biggest concern is that I think young girls are watching it and that they don’t have the where-with-all to discern that it is not reality.”

Kelly, 52, agreed: “That’s the part that would bother me for a young girl to see who doesn’t, like you say, have the where-with-all to figure it out. They watch her [Kim Kardashian] rationalizing posing for Playboy, something that’s really a negative thing in most people’s minds, and they’ll walk through the same rationalization process themselves as a young person because they don’t have the experience to see it’s not a positive thing.”

When asked at what point do younger girls gain “the where-with-all” to critically engage with overtly sexualized media images, Cindy and Kelly both described life experiences, such as leaving home, maturing, and gaining an education as giving younger
women the tools they need to critically respond to sexualized media content. They also discussed family life as playing an important role in learning values and developing a critical perspective. The women believed that the lessons they taught their children at home helped them navigate contemporary views of sexuality as a form of self-presentation.

The women from this group directly linked a sexualized self-presentation to negative sexual advances by men and boys, as well as to a young woman’s decision to engage in risky sexual behaviors. For these women, a sexualized persona invites sexual advances and encourages younger women to engage in sexual behaviors before they are ready.

Becky, 48, said, “Things have changed so much. You know, now they have bracelets you can wear in high school that tells how far you’ll go. So, what’s so bad about Playboy, you know? The bracelets are different colors. Mine are out of it but I know it happened and still happens. It’s huge. They are affected by this stuff. They do learn from what they see on TV.” When asked who “they” are, Becky responded, “The young girls, who are very impressionable. They want to be liked. They want people to notice them.”

The older women drew a direct link between watching sexualized material on television and engaging in sexual behaviors. Mel, 45, said, “Yes, it bothers me. Young girls, who are wearing those outfits, because it’s what they see on TV, are going to be more prone to being sexually active. It’s about displaying your body but it encourages more. It’s about drawing that male attention. For example, I would think that Lacey probably has slept with many people. She’s sending the message to young girls that it’s OK.”

In addition to young girls, the older women also worried about the general population, specifically people who are uneducated, were not taught good values, are not media savvy, or have low self-esteem. For example, Kelly, 52, said, “I do think that
Hollywood thinks the basic American public is so stupid that they’ll just take it all in and say, ‘Yea, that’s real.’ I can tell the difference but I bet there’s a lot of people out there that can’t. They probably think this is reality.”

The women commented on the difference between their viewing habits and “other people.” Sara, 56, said, “I watch this stuff but I don’t watch it in a gullible way. I know better. I think there are probably people who don’t know better and I feel bad for them, but for me it’s just TV. That’s all it is.”

Sara discussed “just TV” as a benign way to pass time, not something that affects her beliefs. As the discussions progressed, it became obvious that the shows Sara consumed on a regular basis did have an impact on her life, even though she expressed invulnerability to possible effects. These effects are discussed in the next two sections on social comparisons and pressures to conform.

Thus, the older women separated themselves from the “basic American public,” and felt they were savvier viewers capable of a critical perspective. The women attributed their ability to view the shows from a critical standpoint to a strong value system (sometimes associated with Christianity), life experiences, and personal definitions regarding female empowerment and gender expectations. The women communicated an expectation of respect and felt shows presenting sexualized imagery worked to weaken society’s perceptions of women. By adopting a critical perspective, the women from this group felt protected from the effects of sexualized imagery and identified “others” as susceptible victims.
Middle Age Women

“I know it’s just TV, but I think a lot of younger girls probably think it’s really the way they should act.”

The middle age women also expressed concern for younger audiences. They identified younger women as being more susceptible to sexualized images of women, especially when celebrity lifestyles are linked to these images. In other words, younger women who are attracted to celebrities are more likely to adopt behaviors that they see rewarded on their favorite shows. The women from this group felt they were immune to the effects of sexualized images from reality TV because they are capable of differentiating between real life and what is presented on TV, they are more focused on “the important things” in life, and there is a “knowledge gap” between older women and younger women.

The middle age women felt they viewed reality TV with a critical eye, something young girls are incapable of. The women worried about young girls and the prevalence of sexualized images of women.

Marty, 28, said: “I think it sucks the message that it sends. I think about my daughter and what she is going to see out there. All these images. The smart part of it is 5% but if she was just flipping through then what is she more than likely to see, it’s them running around naked. I can separate it from reality because I know TV is just TV, but I don’t think our young girls can. I worry about the effects for them.”

For Marty, then, a regular reality TV viewer, the “smart part” was easily identifiable. She worried, however, that younger viewers would not be able to differentiate between the “smart part” and the parts that were detrimental to women, such as the focus on sexualized bodies. When asked what she defined as the “smart part,” Marty said, “The part when they’re
actually accomplishing something…when they’re doing something besides looking pretty and showing too much of their bodies. When they’re engaging in relationships and being real.” Marty worried that young women would embrace the sex-as-power message, i.e., the idea that women using their bodies to gain success and wield power is acceptable, instead of the “smart part,” i.e., women who use intellect to accomplish goals and develop relationships.

Marty was not the only one who worried about younger women, especially adolescents. Karina, 29, a high school teacher, said: “In my experience the parents can be so blind to what’s going on. I mean, you should see the clothes they come to school wearing. It’s awful because this stuff really happens. The young girls are looking for role models and they see all the glitz and glamour and attention and they just don’t have the experience to know it’s not good.”

Many of the middle age women linked the sexualized images young women view on TV to their behaviors in real life. Penny, 36, said, “I do see young girls wearing things that I never would have had the guts to wear when I was that age. First of all, my mom would not have let me out of the house, but I also just don’t think I was focused on that. You can see how much these girls are influenced. They just don’t know any better.”

For Penny, and most of the middle age women, there seemed to be a perceivable shift in the amount and degree of sexualized material present in today’s media selections. Sam, 35, described this shift: “In the past 10 years things on TV just got really sexual,” and said that it is different from anything she remembers from her childhood. The women thought the amount of sexualized material available to young female audiences overshadows other examples of empowerment, specifically women who do not rely on their bodies to get
attention. As a result, the middle age women felt the shift in sexualized material has a greater impact on younger audiences because they have been inundated with it their entire lives.

The women from this group described a knowledge gap of adolescent girls and young women versus older women, defining this gap as one that can be bridged through education (i.e., lessons from their mothers, women’s studies courses), the transition from youth to adulthood (i.e., going away to college, getting a “real” job, supporting oneself), and life experiences (i.e. becoming a wife, becoming a mother, traveling outside the United States). Interestingly enough, the women did not cite gender discrimination as a motivator to recognizing self-sexualization as a type of exploitation. According to Steinem (1993), younger women, who have yet to encounter “radicalizing experiences,” such as exploitation, unequal pay, marriage, child care, and aging are more likely to accept an idealized notion of equality (p. 212). Similarly, the middle-aged women identified life changes as the means by which young women gain the tools necessary to counter damaging effects of sexualized images of women, but did not identify discrimination or exploitation as a means to open young women’s eyes to the oppressive social structures that inform sexualized images of women.

**Young Women**

“I think when you hit a certain age then you realize that it’s a personal decision but when you’re younger you don’t really have a distinction about it.”

To a lesser extent, the young women also worried about younger audiences, referring to hypothetical girls, as well as their younger sisters, neighbors, and cousins. In addition to younger audiences, the women from this group who responded negatively to the clips also focused on values and morals, expressing concern for female audiences of all ages who do
not possess a strong moral compass and might look to overtly sexualized images as literal examples of empowerment, rather than as inconsequential entertainment.

The young women who focused their concern on younger audiences cited vulnerability and impressionability as reasons younger women might be affected by shows like Keeping up with the Kardashians, The Girls Next Door, and My Super Sweet 16. The women who responded negatively to the shows were the most vocal about possible effects for young girls. Mary, 20, said, “It is definitely degrading to women and influencing younger girls to wear less clothes and be more materialistic. So, I don’t really think anything great is coming out of it. I know better but I think it definitely affects younger girls that don’t know better.”

When asked how Mary “knows better,” she described her belief in equality and her experience in a woman studies course that she took her first year in college. Other young women who responded negatively to the shows also described knowing the difference between what is acceptable in real life and what is acceptable for women on TV. Although many of the young women felt they were able to make the distinction between what is acceptable and unacceptable, some did not believe younger girls had developed this mature perspective.

A few of the young women who responded positively to the shows also worried about younger female audiences. Jill, 22, said, “I’m not like opposed to Playboy but I do agree that it sends the wrong message to younger girls. I think when you hit a certain age then you realize that it’s a personal decision but when you’re younger you don’t really have a distinction about it.” When I asked Jill what lead to an awareness of the distinction, she
described how young girls are more impressionable and they desire attention, whereas when you go away to college or begin working, your focus changes and your world gets bigger.

Some of the young women worried about how younger audiences would respond to fifteen-year-old Lacey from *My Super Sweet 16*.

Erika, 18, said:

If you think about the people that are probably watching this show, chances are they’re middle schoolers, or in high school themselves. And if they see a 15-year-old doing what she’s doing, it’s going to seem completely OK for them to kind of have the same advanced sexuality and skimpy clothing and just kind of that attitude that they deserve whatever they want. And I think if they saw someone that was older and an adult doing that, they would at least think, ‘OK well, that’s how adults act.’ Not, this is how my peers act. So maybe I should be acting more like that and wait until I’m older to try the other stuff.

Some of the young women also worried that the images from reality TV would translate into real behaviors for younger audiences before they are ready for those experiences. In the college-aged women’s minds, young girls are incapable of making the distinction between what is acceptable behavior for “real” women their age and what is acceptable for “TV women” or older women.

According to Jill, 22, who found the shows enjoyable but also consequential, sexual awareness is something that develops as you get older. Shows like the ones used for this study impact younger girls who have yet to develop an understanding of the power of their sexuality. Jill worried about younger female audiences but also felt it was part of growing up to experiment with provocative clothing.
Jill said:

It’s kind of like you go through stages of it. Like when you’re in high school or maybe early college, and you wear something that’s really provocative, you might not understand what it means that you’re wearing that. It’s just something that’s fun. And, you know like, I mean, I can’t believe that my Mom let me wear some of the stuff in high school that she did. But I didn’t really think about it being something of sexuality or objectification. If you take a gender studies class in college, I mean, it’s really hard to wear something like that once you kind of have an awareness of what you’re doing for females overall by emphasizing your body rather than other qualities you have.

The younger women felt emulation was an issue for younger audiences, but did not worry about how it affected their own behavior. Andy, 19, said, “It depends on the viewer. I mean I think that all of us do have our own standards so to some of us we’re laughing because it’s just ridiculous. But to people who think that it is reality, especially to young girls that think that it’s OK bothers me the most.”

Some of the young women discussed their background and specifically how they were raised as a means for protecting themselves from the effects of sexualized media images. Amy, 21, said, “Depending on your lifestyle, like, my parents did not raise me in that environment so I know differently than that but for someone whose parents aren’t around or if they watch that and didn’t have much of anything to base it on then they would be more influenced by that then someone else.”

Some of the women attributed their ability to resist adopting a sexualized persona to the values they were taught by their mothers. As a result, they worried about young girls
whose moms “let them run wild,” “aren’t around,” or “didn’t teach them the difference between right and wrong.”

A few of the young women, specifically the ones who responded negatively to the clips, discussed Christian values as a reason some people might not be affected by sexualized images, while others are. For example, Addie, 18, a self-proclaimed Christian, explained that young girls who attend church regularly and have a strong sense of faith should know better than to buy into sexual exploitation as a form of empowerment.

The third-person effect was less evident among the young women who embraced the shows as a powerful example of women pursuing a valid career path. In their minds, the message was a positive part of self-expression and therefore unproblematic. In response to the women who worried about young girls, these women discussed the inevitability of immersion into a sexualized environment and did not connect sexualized self-presentations to sexual behaviors. In fact, these women made a clear distinction between embracing sexuality as a form of power and actually having sex. The women who embraced the sex-as-power imagery viewed a sexualized persona as something a woman does first and foremost for herself, not something she does because she wants to invite sex.

In response to watching the clip of The Girls Next Door, Eve, 20, said:

I don’t think the show sends a negative message. I even forget that they’re with Hugh Hefner and that they all sleep with him. It doesn’t really run through my mind while I’m watching the show. It’s not about sex in that way. I think the main message that it sends, and a positive message, is that there’s more to the Playboy mansion than just that aspect of it. The women do charity work and have jobs and have lives outside of
that. They like to dress that way because it makes them feel good and there’s nothing wrong with that.

In sum, the young women were split in their reaction to possible effects from watching shows like the ones used in this study. The biggest mediating factor was the women’s response to the shows’ messages. In other words, if they agreed with the message then they were less likely to identify or to be concerned about effects for themselves or others. If they disagreed with the shows’ messages then their level of concern for younger women varied in intensity and focus. Some of the young women felt life experiences and maturity offered women protection from the effects of sexualized images, leaving young women vulnerable. Others felt family values and religion served as a buffer to the negative effects of sexualized imagery, leaving those with a weak moral compass vulnerable.

**Conclusions re: Third-Person Effect**

Evidence of a third-person effect was observed in all the focus groups. Even the women who enjoyed watching the shows often referred to the negative effects the shows might have on others, i.e. younger girls, uneducated women, naïve women, shallow women, or women/girls who were not taught good values. The women almost always exempted themselves from being vulnerable to negative effects.

The idea of self-enhancement helps explain why many of the women from the focus groups denied being affected by the shows. Self-enhancement suggests that because most people are ego-driven, they are unwilling to admit to being influenced by the media they consume. If they were to admit that reality television affected them then they would be admitting to an intellectual weakness, i.e., smart people are not affected by media (Reid, &
As a result, the women perceive others as more susceptible to media effects and felt they were too smart, mature, and savvy enough to be influenced.

The women cited a number of reasons for feeling immune to negative effects of sexualized images, including education, maturity, self-esteem, knowledge of the contrived nature of reality TV, and moral fortitude. Although the women, especially the older women, felt they were immune to the effects of sexualized imagery, the discussions from the focus groups suggest otherwise. The next section addresses social comparison, specifically the ways in which the women from the focus groups compare themselves to the women from the shows. Additionally, the final section deals with how these comparisons led to feeling pressure to conform.

**Social Comparison**

The idea of social comparison helped explain the common curiosity that many of the women from the focus groups held for the women from the clips, as well as the ways in which viewing these shows affected their lives and self-perceptions. According to Baruh (2010), “The people-watching behavior that is associated with reality television may simply be due to a drive to learn about other people” (p. 205). As viewers learn about the people depicted on television, they also might begin to incorporate some of the beliefs, values and behaviors into their everyday lives.

Social comparison theory suggests that individuals feel a strong need to evaluate and improve themselves and often engage in social comparison with others to satisfy this need (Festinger, 1954). Two commonly identified types of social comparisons are downward comparisons and upward comparisons. Downward social comparison refers to comparisons made with others that people perceive to be less fortunate or somehow inferior to themselves.
and generally enhances mood and feelings of self-worth (Wills, 1991). Upward social comparisons, or comparisons with others whom people perceive to have a higher social standing, often threaten self-worth and impact people’s mood in a negative way (Wheeler & Miyake, 1992). In some cases upward social comparisons can lead to positive reactions, especially when motivated by self-improvement. Self-evaluation drives judgments about one’s ability or standing, while self-improvement motives drive the desire to learn how to, or to be motivated to, improve a certain attribute of oneself (Halliwell & Dittmar, 2005).

Social comparison can be applied to the relationship viewers have with people portrayed on television shows as well as the ways in which they relate to them. The women from different cohorts, especially the heavy viewers, engaged in upward and downward social comparisons for a number of reasons, including a desire to feel more normal in their lives, a desire to feel superior, and a desire to stay on top of the latest trends and to learn from celebrities who are rewarded for their self-presentations. As a result of these comparisons the women described patterns of media incorporation, or as Steele and Brown (1995) explained, “an associative use of media that often builds on existing attitudes, feelings, and prior learning” and media appropriation, where the women actively applied the sexualized images to their everyday lives (p. 559).

**Older Women**

“I do look at the mom [Kris Jenner] and she’s close to my age so I like to see what she’s wearing, what she’s looking like.”

Throughout the group discussions, most of the older women were critical of the sexualized images, distancing themselves from the women presented in the three shows. This occurred most frequently among the women who did not watch the shows and who
responded negatively to the content. For these women, Kim Kardashian, the women from *The Girls Next Door*, and Lacey were positioned as other. For the two women who watched reality TV regularly, the women from the shows provided an opportunity to engage in social comparisons that led to the adoption of behaviors and encouraged modeling.

For Sara, 56, the only woman from this group who watched the shows used in this study on a regular basis, appropriation of styles was one of the ways she applied what she viewed to her life. In Sara’s words, “I look at the things they wear, their sunglasses. I like to see how they’re wearing their hair. I like to see what kind of clothes they’re wearing. It might stimulate some kind of style for me.” Sara was quick to point out that she did not dress provocatively but might appropriate a certain style from one of the Kardashian women in a more conservative way. Sara did not look to the women from *The Girls Next Door* for fashion guidance, however: “Those women dress like little girls…the knee socks and the pony tails. It’s a little creepy.” Gill (2007) referred to these types of clothing choices as the “girlification” of women through a sexualized appearance that draws from childhood, where adult women wear knee high socks, ponytails and carry around lollipops. Although Sara enjoyed the show, she was turned off by the girliness.

Sara’s social comparisons with the reality TV women focused on things that were relevant to her life. Style, aging, and body image were things that either provided a positive site of comparison, i.e., Sara looked to the women to gain knowledge about style and felt good improving and modifying her look, or they provided a negative site of comparison, i.e., Sara compared her body and face to the women from the shows and it made her feel a need to improve herself, even through drastic measures like plastic surgery. Sara felt concern about the way the shows impacted her self-image but said that if she were not watching these
particular shows then she would be reading a magazine or watching a movie where the women were presented in the same way. In other words, Sara was resigned that women are expected to maintain a certain level of attractiveness, especially as they age.

The problem that Sara and a few of the other older women identified is that the definition of what is attractive has changed to incorporate a sexual vibe that is harder to replicate when you are in your 50s and 60s. To compete with the women on TV, real women must take drastic measures.

In sum, social comparisons led the women from this group to evaluate themselves in a variety of ways. Upward comparisons affected their self-esteem in negative ways. For the women who did not watch the shows regularly and made it a point to avoid content that presents women as “sex-objects,” it was disturbing for them to compare themselves to something identified by Cindy, 48, as “caricatures created for male pleasure.” Nan and Sara, the two women who were more comfortable watching the shows, tried to look past the sexualized nature of the women’s personas to focus on things that were relevant to their lives, like fashion trends and beauty advice. Unfortunately, over time, the sexualized images became more salient and the women began to question their definitions of what it means to be sexy and the lengths they are willing to go to conform.

**Middle Age Women**

“It’s hard not to compare yourself to this stuff. It’s everywhere.”

The middle age women engaged in social comparison in a number of ways, some of which varied from the older women. As a whole, the women from this group were somewhat critical of the women from the shows’ lifestyle choices but also expressed a desire to learn from them. The women who watched regularly looked for ways to relate to the women from
the shows and voiced pleasure in learning about new trends. The women who watched regularly focused less on style and more on body maintenance trends, placing more emphasis on maintaining a desirable body. Based on their discussions, most of the middle age women looked to the women from the shows to help them define desirability and expand the ways in which they engage in body work.

The middle age women were critical of the reality TV women’s focus on outer beauty; however their comments suggested that a critical perspective did not make them immune to the beauty expectations and norms that regulate the lives of the women portrayed on the shows. The regular viewers and the women who enjoyed the shows talked about body maintenance and how they looked to the shows to stay in the loop regarding popular trends.

Marty, 28, said: “I know this is way too much information but watching these shows has changed the way I view some things…things like tanning or bikini waxing. I never would have done that stuff before but I was curious because I see it so often on TV. I actually got a Brazilian bikini wax for the first time this year. Don’t judge! It’s so not me but it’s kind of addictive once you start doing it. I do it for myself…for the way it makes me feel; but I think Greg loves it.”

After watching the women from the reality shows regularly talking about the importance of getting bikini waxes, something that Marty initially found shocking became an adopted behavior that she used to help her feel sexy. Although she did mention that her husband seemed to love it, she reiterated that she adopted the behavior because it allowed her to be in control of her body. Marty also described getting spray tans during the winter to help, in her words, “feel better about my body.”
The women also discussed body maintenance in relation to exercise; describing workouts they viewed on reality shows as a motivating factor in their own workout routines. The women described feeling agitated when their clothes did not fit right or they had gained a few pounds.

Penny, 36, said: “I watch these shows and their bodies are close to perfect. I can’t help but compare myself and I know it’s not realistic to think I can look that way but I do feel better when I’m working out. I enrolled in boot camp this fall and it really helped me to feel better in my clothes.” Penny explained that “boot camp” is a work out trend that many celebrities have embraced, and is usually a four to six week class made up of structured, high-intensity workouts, modeled after military-style training. Marty also had recently participated in an early morning boot camp class to “tone up and get my body back.”

None of the middle age women had turned to plastic surgery yet, but, a few of the women expressed an interest in getting their breasts enhanced. The women blamed pregnancy and nursing on the state of their breasts, suggesting that they wanted them to look the way they did before having babies. Instead of celebrating their body’s transformations after motherhood, the women compared themselves to the images in popular culture and were disappointed. Although none of the women wanted what Penny dubbed, “Porn-star breasts,” they did have an expectation that their breasts should still be in Marty’s words, “beautiful, rather than deflated balloons.”

In sum, although the women were vocal about a desire to place greater emphasis on inner-beauty and intelligence, their discussions suggest that they do learn from the shows they watch and try out new trends based on what they learn. Consumer spending allows the women to transform their bodies to fit an ideal that is presented by the reality shows as
sexually desirable. Instead of viewing the waxing, tanning, or exercise as a type of work, the women viewed it as a type of pampering. Their actions contradicted their beliefs regarding the importance of beauty and narrowly defined definitions of sexuality. By embracing things like waxing, spray tans, and plastic surgery, the women are slowly becoming more comfortable with things they previously would have rejected.

**Young Women**

“*Compared to my life, it just seems like such a vacation …*”

The young women also engaged in social comparisons with the reality TV women, focusing on similarities and differences. For the young women, the comparisons led to feelings of fascination, attraction, jealousy, inspiration, and desire. Many of the young women identified elements of the reality TV women’s lifestyles as different from their own, often describing them as enviable.

Some of the young women viewed the women from the clips’ lifestyles as easy and uncomplicated. For example, Lena, 21, said: “They don’t have a care in the world. They can just kind of exist and be happy and, like, whatever they need is taken care of. That would be kind of nice. It’s different than my life. I have to worry about stuff that they don’t even have to think about.” For Lena, “real worries” were not part of the women from the shows’ lives because they did not have financial burdens or want for anything material.

Eve, 20, similarly said: “Compared to my life, it just seems like such a vacation from normal life. Just to be so extravagant and over-the-top for a day would be hilarious. And just, like, so fun to indulge yourself.”

The lifestyles presented on the shows were tied to material wealth and then directly tied to the reality TV women’s sexualized personas. The young women made the connection
between having a desirable body, expressing a sexualized persona through clothing choices and career decisions, and living a lifestyle that was “care-free,” “untroubled,” and “easy.” The monetary success experienced by the women from Keeping up with the Kardashians and The Girls Next Door, which was a direct result of presenting a sexualized persona, allowed the TV women to live without “real” worries, and many of the young women were envious of such circumstances.

More than any other cohort, the younger women were fascinated with the celebrity lifestyle, expressing a desire to see how the rich and famous live and imagining themselves transported into that environment.

April, 21, said, “It’s always fun to see how celebrities live, and like, the struggles or whatever they go through.” Kris, 20, agreed: “While I’m watching, I like to imagine myself doing some of the things they get to do or making the decisions they have to make. I like to pretend I’m them or that I’m friends with them.” Similarly, Amy, 21, said: “It’s fun to put myself in their shoes.”

In one conversation, three of the young women talked about their attraction to the shows, focusing on their fascination with the celebrity lifestyle, interest in different personalities, and seeing celebrities’ reactions in unusual situations:

Ali: I think it’s a guilty pleasure. That’s how I see it. I mean, I would never want that….I mean, it would be nice to be really, really wealthy and be able to do nothing all day, but I don’t think I’d really want that lifestyle so it’s just really entertaining for me to watch that and, like, kind of be a little jealous, you know, of their clothes and stuff like that. That’s why I enjoy it.
Jill: And their personalities just fascinate me. Just the way….on another show I’ve seen Kim was just throwing a fit, just the biggest fit of her life about something and that’s just so not like me but I just…it’s just fascinating to me.

Jo: I would have to say the same thing. It’s just really funny for me to watch how some people react in certain situations and imagine how I’d react.

Thus, the younger women compared the shows to their own lives, contrasted their own personalities with those of the women in the shows, and imagined how they would respond in similar situations.

For some of the young women, the distance between themselves and the reality TV women provided a safe buffer, and allowed them to enjoy the sexualized nature of the shows.

Jennifer, 20, said: “It’s so not normal for us to be experiencing that, so to kind of experience that via a celebrity and compare ourselves to that is OK for us. So, if it’s kind of distanced in the huge amount of sex that they put in the TV shows and the movies. As long as it’s far enough away from us but we still get to experience it, and imagine it, then it’s OK.”

Thus, for Jennifer, comparisons were acceptable because she felt distanced from the women presented on the shows.

Some of the young women used the shows in a positive way to magnify the normalcy of their own lives. According to Piper, 19: “I just think I like it because it makes me feel more normal to see their lives and how mine compares. They deal with stuff and they do have problems, too.”

For some of the young women, then, normalcy meant that they could relate to the women from the shows because the women had similar issues to their own. For others,
however, normalcy came from seeing a lifestyle that was implausible. As a result, the comfortable nature of the viewers’ “normal” lives was accentuated.

Eve, 20, said: “It’s like a lifestyle that is interesting and entertaining to watch but compared to my own it’s one that I would never want to have. It is interesting to see behind the scenes because you hear so much about celebrities all the time and to get a glimpse into their lives is entertaining in and of itself. It does make my life seem more normal, though.”

For the women who watched and enjoyed the shows, social comparisons were often experienced as inspiring. For example, Ellen, 20, discussed how she looked up to Kim Kardashian and found inspiration in her success and the way she takes advantage of opportunities. Kim’s success and sexualized body image did not cause feelings of insecurity.

Kris, 20, a regular viewer of *Keeping up with the Kardashians*, also engaged in upward social comparisons with Kim Kardashian that resulted in positive feelings. Kris described them as “feelings of envy, but not in a jealous sort of way.” Kris said she was inspired by Kim: “I just think it’s so strange that she’s so successful and it makes me feel like anything is possible. She works really hard, she’s very maintained, and beautiful. I work really hard so it reinforces my belief that good things come to people who work hard.”

Social comparison theorists suggest that highly motivated individuals avoid feelings of inferiority and are instead encouraged by the upward comparison (Wheeler, 1966). For many of the young women, social comparisons resulted in feelings of inspiration rather than feelings of inferiority.

In contrast, some of the women who watched and enjoyed the shows were critical of the women and engaged in downward social comparisons, which made them feel better about their lives. For example, Louisa, 19, said: “Whenever I watch these shows and compare it to
my life I put my life in perspective and see how normal it is. Or if there’s some sort of serious crazy drama then it usually makes me feel better. Or if there’s some sort of tragedy then all the better because I have a better life. I know I’m sick but….” Thus, Louisa enjoyed seeing women from reality TV in precarious situations, even though she liked the women and could relate to them on some levels because it made her feel better about her life.

Some of the young women took the process of downward comparison one step further and sought out these types of shows because they enjoyed being critical of the women portrayed. Jewel, 21, said, “I watch because it’s entertaining, not because I want to be like that person. If I’m watching that on TV, I’m like, ‘You’re such an idiot.’ I’m not like, ‘Oh, you’re really cool.’ And you know like, I would never do this, so let me watch somebody else do this and make fun of them.”

Karen, 21, said:

It’s almost like these women don’t have a good grasp on reality, like what really matters and like, what actually like, people care about. They don’t have a good grasp on things like that, and that makes me feel really self-righteous and I’m not saying that I have it right all the time, but I feel like people that act that way are just, like, they don’t have a good grasp on what’s really important or a good idea of what really matters. It kind of makes me feel good to watch that because I know I’m better than that…better than them.”

Thus, the younger women who engaged in downward social comparison used the shows to evaluate themselves and ultimately felt superior.

Many of the young women admitted to watching the shows, especially *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, to learn about fashion and current styles.
Ali, 21, said: “I guess that I watch predominantly to see how they live, but maybe there’s something about seeing how the wealthy live, I mean, I don’t know, maybe people want to be like that, and so they want to learn how to act like them. I just think it’s crazy that they have that much money and can basically do whatever they want.” When asked if Ali felt she learned anything from the shows, she said, “I look at their clothes and I like seeing how they’re fixing their hair…that kind of stuff. They can be very girly and I like that.”

Anna, 22, said: “If they’re wearing something that’s cute, I might go out and buy it. Sometimes they have the styles that you can find cheaper. I like to compare my style to theirs and get ideas that way.”

Ellen, 20, said: “I feel like women in general look to celebrities to see what to wear and how to do their hair and stuff. So, shows like that really appeal because you get more of a glimpse of how they live and what’s in style. I like that Kim can dress very feminine or sexy, but then she also dresses very professional at times too. It gives me ideas for when I’m going out-out versus going to somewhere I need to be more conservative.”

Thus, Ellen defined “out-out” as somewhere she would dress more provocatively, like a club or a fraternity party, and described a desire to feel sexy as an inspiration for clothing choices. Some of the women from the focus groups admitted that clothing choices and experimentation with styles, especially styles they would define as sexy, were informed by women like Kim Kardashian.

In contrast to the older cohorts, many of the young women embraced clothing choices that exemplified Gill’s (2007) definition of the “girlification” of women. The younger audiences were more accepting of this style, with one of the young women describing it as “cute,” and another describing it as “fun and feminine.” The young women were the only
ones who responded positively to the way the women from *The Girls Next Door* dressed, explaining that they would wear “girly” clothing in certain situations because, as Lena, 21, said, she enjoys “changing things up and having fun with clothes.” The women who watched the shows regularly and enjoyed the content were more likely to label these clothing choices as positive and playful expressions of femininity, rather than as direct examples of a commercially driven sexualized culture inspired by pornography (Gill, 2007).

More so than any other cohort, the young women embraced the concept that material consumption is a fulfilling and central part of being a woman. They compared their personal style to the “celebrity” styles seen on reality TV and discussed the various ways they copy things they find desirable.

The younger women who watched the shows regularly and enjoyed them also talked about how they looked to the shows and the women from the shows for advice on working out and maintaining their bodies. They viewed body maintenance as a normal and positive part of being a woman. Body maintenance was defined as exercise, tanning, waxing, hair color and extensions, and nail maintenance. The financial burden of engaging in these activities was rarely discussed, suggesting that the importance of body maintenance outweighed the financial burden, which was often covered by the young women’s parents. The women who responded negatively to the shows, in contrast, were critical of body work, describing it as “materialistic,” “superficial,” and “just not something I’m going to waste my time or money doing.”

In sum, the college-aged women applied what they viewed from the clips to their lives in a variety of ways, most of which were expressed through social comparisons. The discussions shed light on how young women engaged in social comparisons, as well as how
these comparisons influenced the appropriation and incorporation of behaviors and beliefs. Many of the young women looked to the shows to learn about fashion, to imitate sexy clothing choices for special occasions, and to get tips for maintaining an attractive and well-kept body. In contrast, the younger women who avoided the adoption of behaviors and beliefs engaged in downward comparisons that result in feelings of superiority rather than identification and affinity.

Conclusions re: Social Comparison

All of the women who participated in this study engaged in some form of social comparison with the women from the shows. Both self-evaluative and self-improvement tendencies emerged from all focus groups with women describing downward and upward social comparisons as a means for evaluating identity constructs and looking for ways to improve themselves. For women who did not value a sexualized persona, social comparison was typically engaged in as a means to feel superior to the women from the shows. Hall (2006) found that viewers often engage in downward social comparisons to enhance their own self-esteem, suggesting that some viewers gain pleasure in seeing others struggle. This was apparent in some of the women’s responses, most commonly from the women who do not watch the shows on a regular basis or feel a connection to the women from the shows.

For some women the shows provided models for how to dress, how to maintain a feminine body, and how to succeed in life. The degree to which the shows were relevant to the women’s lives varied based on viewing habits, the viewer’s perceptions of the reality TV women, and personal identity constructs. The women who watched regularly and liked the women from the shows were more likely to engage in upward social comparison motivated by self-improvement. The women who did not watch the shows and who responded
negatively towards the women were more likely to engage in downward social comparisons motivated by a desire to feel better about their lives or to feel superior.

Cultivation and social cognitive theories help to explain how and why exposure to overtly sexualized material might affect perceptions, values and behaviors of some of the women from this study and not for others. As Social Cognitive Theory suggests, heavy viewers were more likely to model behaviors from the shows used in this study. In regards to the young women, the heavy viewers were more likely to adopt and/or support a world-view similar to the one conveyed by the shows, one that emphasizes sexuality as a form of power and places great value on the female body. Many of the women, especially the young women who have grown up in a more sexualized media environment, supported the belief that the female body requires constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodeling through consumer spending in order to conform to narrow judgments of female desirability.

In regards to the women from the two older groups, heavy viewers were more likely to appropriate the styles presented on the shows and to try out certain forms of body work, such as waxing, plastic surgery, and spray tans, but did not agree with the world-view presented on the show, i.e., the belief that it is acceptable and empowering for women to use their sexuality to gain success and wield power.

The heavy viewers from the college-aged group also appropriated the styles and forms of body work, but were more likely to support the belief that women who use their sexuality to gain success in life exemplify female empowerment. It appears that younger audiences, who watch regularly and have been exposed to sexualized content for most of their lives, have cultivated a belief system similar to the one presented on the shows. Many of these women suggested that they might have been surprised by the images when they were
younger, but over time have come to view them as normal, desirable, and a true reflection of the real world.

Through social comparisons many of the women from the focus groups imagined themselves living the lives of the women from the shows. According to Steele and Brown (1995) appropriation can occur when viewers use media to “fantasize about possible selves or situations” (p. 565). The women who participated in this study continually assessed the women from the shows and imagined themselves in the scenarios they viewed as glamorous, exciting, and pleasurable. Their assessments were influenced by many things, including but not limited to facets of identity, upbringing, education, religion, feminist consciousness, and their engagement with other media outlets.

The reality TV women present an image of accumulated wealth and celebrity status, which are directly linked to consumer culture. The women from the focus groups looked to the reality TV women for advice on fashion trends, hair styles, and other beauty-related commodities. The shows offered the image of successful women who have gained power through the use of their bodies, which have become the ultimate commodity and means to achieving economic and social mobility (Coy & Garner, 2010). The young women from the focus groups, as well as some of the older women, looked to the sexualized images of Kim Kardashian and The Girls Next Door to see where they should spend their money, how they can tweak their own personal style to feel more feminine and attractive, and what types of body work are acceptable.

Many of the women from the focus groups compared their lives to what they viewed in the clips and most of them responded in one of the following ways: they felt envy (i.e., they viewed the women’s lives as pleasurable and exciting), they felt more normal (i.e., they
felt more secure in their own skin and their own lives), or they felt judgment (i.e., they felt sanctimonious and self-righteous -- some of them experienced pleasure in feeling superior to the women from the clips, others pitied them). In all instances the women engaged in social comparison, which affected their enjoyment of the shows and affected the ways in which they applied what they viewed to their everyday lives. For the women who found the shows desirable, watched often, and liked the women from the shows, imitation (through appropriation of styles, engagement in body work, etc.) was more likely.

Theoretically, the effects of social comparison should increase if the area of comparison is applicable to an individual’s life (Tesser, 1988; Halliwell & Dittmar, 2005). In other words, a comparison on a dimension that is not relevant to someone should not threaten self-evaluation or offer a relevant site for self-improvement. For example, several studies have demonstrated that women who placed value in appearance, specifically a thin body ideal, were more affected by images presenting the thin-ideal because they engaged in upward social comparisons that lead to diminished self-esteem and feelings of pressure to conform to the ideal (Dittmar & Howard, 2004; Halliwell & Dittmar, 2004; Heinberg & Thompson, 1995). This was not the case for the women who participated in the focus groups. Most of the women who responded critically to the reality TV women and their focus on sexuality and physical beauty still viewed them as a motivator for self-improvement. For a few of the young women, specifically the ones who described clear identity constructs, such as Christian values or a strong feminist consciousness, social comparisons were not relevant because, in their minds, the possible domains for comparison were not applicable to their lives.
All of the women engaged in fantasizing about possible selves or situations, expressing a desire to experience various aspects of the women from the clips’ lives. For many of the women from the focus groups, social comparisons opened the door to feelings of pressure, which informed and influenced behaviors, and resulted in varying levels of anxiety.

Pressures to Conform

Most of the women from the focus groups felt they were unaffected by sexualized images from the shows they loved, loved to hate, or unequivocally hated. The women’s discussions, however, suggested they do feel pressured by sexualized images. Unrealistic expectations were identified by women from the two older cohorts as fueling feelings of inadequacy and apprehension, leading them to question what it means to be sexy. The younger women were less vocal about the pressures they felt from overtly sexualized imagery, with many expressing acceptance and resignation rather than anxiety. In contrast to the two older cohorts, rather than embracing a critical perspective, the young women felt pressure to accept the images as empowering.

Older Women

“I can’t help but think about the things I can do to look younger.”

Although all of the older women were critical of the imagery, it was clear that they still felt pressure to conform to popular culture’s definition of what it means to be sexy. This pressure affected their lives in negative ways.

Mel, 45, said: “I feel pressure. I don’t worry about it a lot, but you do feel it. It really isn’t fair that we have to try to keep up with this.”

The pressure the older women felt from sexualized images of women played a role in the way they viewed their own bodies, their expectations of their bodies, and the length they
were willing to go to, as Mel put it, “keep up.” The older women agreed that it was “sad,” but felt that as definitions of sexy change and become more prominent, the pressure to conform also becomes stronger and a more central part of a woman’s identity.

Mel said: “I think sexy is sexy, which is bad as you get older because five kids later you can’t look like that but yet that’s still the mental image that most men have for women. It’s exhausting.” Nan, 56, agreed: “What can you do to make yourself look better and look sexy because sex is what it’s about right now. Not correct and not right but it’s there, whether right or wrong, it’s there.”

Thus, the women from this group described a shift in gender expectations, explaining they had always felt pressure to conform to an idealized beauty norm but the emphasis on expressing sexuality had never been so prevalent as it was now.

For the older women, the shows provided examples of femininity that are unattainable and problematic. Becky, 48, questioned the meaning of The Girls Next Door clip: “What does this mean? That I should be letting it all hang out like that? That is what is attractive? I guess so. It’s not just women from the younger shows. Those housewives do the same thing and some of them are my age.”

Sara, 56, said:

We’re more attractive at older ages, but then again, a lot of it is artificial. A lot of it comes with a lot of pain and pressure to look younger and to stay young and sexy and to be 25 forever. I’d like to see it a little bit different from that. I think our whole life, as a woman, should be celebrated and not have that be the most exciting and best time. Yes, it is exciting in so many ways, but I just think it’s unfair. I think it’s unfair to our little girls and unfair to our mothers.
Pressure to conform to sexualized images of women caused anxiety for the older woman. They expressed concern that women today are more likely to get surgery to fit into a sexualized mold, suggesting that sexualized images are to blame for eating disorders and the popularity of Botox and breast surgeries, even among women in their immediate social circles.

Mel, 45, admitted to having had breast enhancement surgery, grabbing her breast and joking, “Where do you think these came from?” Other women from this group also admitted to Botox and face peels in the past and even suggested they would consider doing additional things to look younger and feel better about their outer appearance.

The older women also felt pressure to conform to narrowly defined definitions of beauty that focus on youth and sexuality. In her follow-up interview, Sara, 56, admitted to having recently had Botox and even disclosed that she was currently considering a facelift: “I do compare myself to other women – in my life and on TV – and I just feel that a little help wouldn’t hurt. I think that Kris [Kim Kardashian’s mother] had a facelift and I think it looks pretty good.”

The older women supported the notion that “body work” was an “unfortunate” part of being a woman. On varying levels, the older women reinforced the idea that femininity is a bodily property, which requires work to conform to narrow judgments of female attractiveness.

Some of the older women avoided shows like the ones used in the study because of the added pressure they felt to fit into an unrealistic portrayal of femininity. They recognized overt sex-as-power imagery as a type of exploitation and did not categorize the images of Kim Kardashian or the women from The Girls Next Door as attractive or desirable. They
were critical of women using sex as a tool to sell themselves. They expressed all of these opinions with conviction; however, they still felt pressured by the images.

The women expressed disappointed because this type of imagery grabs people’s attention, especially men’s. Mel, 45, said, “My husband would watch this in a heartbeat, even though she [Lacey] is that young. It’s distressing to think that’s something he’d find attractive.” Becky, 48, said: “My husband might say, ‘Oh my God, this is ridiculous,’ but he’d still watch.” Nan, 56, said: “Now some men are mature and realize that women change but it doesn’t really matter. If this was on TV and I’m standing there talking to my husband then he’s still going to be looking at these women and it’s a shame.”

Thus, as the women were viewing the clips, they were also thinking about how their husbands would view and respond to seeing images like these, which caused varying degrees of anxiety.

In sum, the older women were affected by the images they viewed during the clips. Based on their discussions, they internalized the images and experienced them as anxiety-inducing, even if they did not watch the shows on a regular basis. Unrealistic expectations, pressure to stay young and “keep up,” as well as an understanding that the men in their lives were drawn to sexualized images of women all affected the older women. As a result, many of the women were constantly on diets, had undergone plastic surgery or were considering it, and engaged in other forms of body work, such as Botox and face peels. The critical perspective that most women from this group adopted in response to the shows did not protect them from feeling pressure or adopting behaviors to conform to what they considered “unfair” images of femininity.
Middle Age Women

“I can’t help but wonder what it really means to be sexy.”

The middle age women also worried about how the images from the shows used in this study affected their personal definitions of what it means to be sexy. Marty, 28, explained that she often found herself thinking of images like the ones from the clips and occasionally felt like she needed to try harder to be sexy but then ended up feeling “ridiculous.” Marty said: “I’m not even sure what it means to be sexy anymore. If I think about trying to be like these women I’m always seeing on TV and in the magazines it just feels so wrong to me but it’s all I see so I feel kind of at a loss.” Other women in the group also expressed conflicting feelings related to what it means to be sexy compared with what they regularly view on reality TV, describing it as a form of pressure.

The middle age women focused on the work that goes into maintain this narrowly defined standard. They did not see the sexualized images presented on the reality shows as natural, identifying them, instead, as superficial and materialistic. The type of sexualized expression presented by Kim Kardashian, the women from The Girls Next Door, and Lacey, was not appealing to the women from this group, nor was it something they viewed as possible to attain or maintain. They recognized that the women on the shows had a lot of help and the money necessary for maintaining the body and the image they projected.

Marty, 28, said: “If I had a personal trainer, a disposable income for boob jobs and Botox, a chef, and all the other help then who knows what kind of body I might have, but that’s not reality. Most women don’t have that help or that time, not to mention the money.”

The middle age women recognized how important it is for celebrities to maintain a certain type of body and some expressed feelings of envy that they had the time and were
able to afford the help necessary to do so. This became more apparent as they watched the clips and commented on how nice it would be to have some of the perks the women from the shows experienced, specifically related to having the time to work out, eat healthy, and maintain their bodies with weekly visits to the spa and other grooming facilities.

When asked how the shows made her feel, Sam, 36, said: “almost a little bit of jealousy. To have that kind of life, it’s so out of the ordinary and so focused on what they want to do and there are no limits. They get so much time for themselves, to work out, to get massages, to get pampered.” The women associated the lifestyle with freedom, or in other words, having the time, help, and money to take care of their bodies.

Although some of the women were envious of the freedom the women from the shows experienced, they were vocal about the importance of focusing on inner-beauty rather than outer-beauty. According to them, beauty is fleeting while family, work, and giving back to the community are more important facets of a woman’s identity. A few of the women expressed pity for the reality TV women who seemed to have, what Marty, 28, called: “a very sad, shallow, existence that only focuses on their looks.” The women were critical of the centrality of sex and narrowly defined beauty attributes to the women’s personas but still admitted to feeling its pressure.

Marty, 28, said:

These types of women just continue to perpetuate the idea if you’re sexy, even this over-the-top, produced form of sexy, then you can get what you want. You know that perception people have. Yea, use your sexuality to get where you want to be. It kind of furthers those ideals. It affects us because it sends those messages that being sexy,
and a very certain type of sexy, is important. Even here in suburbia, it is still something we have to think about…worry about.”

When asked what those specific worries were, Marty said, “I guess I just worry that this is what people see as beautiful. This is what men want. Why else is it out there, everywhere?”

The women assumed that the types of images seen in the clips are produced for men, but, Sam, 35, was quick to point out that women encouraged such imagery by watching the shows that celebrate it: “It’s our fault too, though. We’ve downgraded the idea that women have beautiful bodies in all forms. We’ve sexualized every single woman’s body and we eat up shows like this, images like these. These shows are made for us. Why do we watch them?”

Karina, 29, agreed: “It makes me feel disappointed that we watch this stuff. Why do women need to do that and why do we watch? I don’t understand it.”

Although the middle age women could not relate to most of what they viewed in the clips, they felt the prevalence of sexual imagery forced them to question their personal definitions of what it means to be sexy.

Penny, 36, said:

These types of images, like Kim posing in *Playboy*, are everywhere. You just can’t get away from them, no matter what the age or what type of woman; and it’s obnoxious. Is that really what women are supposed to do, supposed to be like? Is that really the most important thing? It’s sad to think that’s what men want. Who can live up to that? It makes me question what sexy means.”
Although many of the women enjoyed watching the shows, they also felt disgusted, saddened, and pressured by overtly sexualized images of women. For some of the women, acceptance of beauty standards and the importance of sexuality seemed unavoidable, even in professional life.

Sam, 35, said:

The more attractive and even sexy you are then the better you do. In any sort of business, I think that everyone, I mean, for me as a massage therapist. There are definitely boundaries that I’m going to have to use but because I’m attractive I’m going to get more clients, more male clients than others. As long as they aren’t inappropriate then I’m perfectly OK with that. I don’t think that there is anything wrong with using your assets to get yourself where you need to be, to find success. It just depends on how far you’re willing to go.

According to Attwood (2006), living in a hyper-sexualized environment makes it “harder and harder to report our sexual feelings and compare our sexual experiences, a particularly frustrating situation given the continued ‘incitement’ to speak about sex,” (p. 89) and ultimately leads to self-scrutiny and self-regulation. In other words, the images of sexuality have become so formulaic and “in-your-face” that personal comparisons often lead to feelings of confusion and doubt.

Karina, 29, said:

It’s everywhere and it never stops. You can’t go to the grocery store without seeing it on the magazine covers. You can’t turn on the TV without seeing it on almost every channel, like these reality shows. You can’t escape these images of in-your-face sex. I’m a pretty confident woman but I still find myself wondering if this is what men
really want. Is this my husband’s fantasy? Is this what I should be striving for?”

Marty was also bothered by these images and felt pressure to conform, but recognized the driving factor behind the images. She said: “I hate it that women have to exploit their bodies to make money and get attention, but they make so much money. It would be hard to turn it down.”

Sam, 35, said: “Obviously it’s a tool that sells. All the way back to Burlesque. It’s a tool that sells and gets attention, but it’s different now. It’s so over-the-top but also more mainstream.”

Thus, the women in this focus group all agreed that the driving force behind this type of imagery was the attention it garners and the monetary reward, and although they were somewhat critical they also expressed understanding and a degree of acceptance.

Young Women

“I’m not going to be the one who says it’s bad …”

The young women who participated in this study rarely brought up pressures to conform directly. They responded to the shows positively, neutrally, or negatively, but did not describe feelings of anxiety related to a pressure to conform to the overtly sexualized personas presented on popular reality TV shows. In contrast to the women from the two older groups, the younger women did not use words like “unfair,” “disappointing,” “exhausting,” or “demanding.” Instead, the young women described feeling pressured to withhold judgment or criticism of overtly sexualized personas.

The majority of the young women responded positively to the shows, the women from the shows, and the shows’ content. They viewed the shows as setting a positive example for women, viewed the shows as an acceptable choice for “other women,” but not a
valid choice for themselves, or viewed the shows as enjoyable but inconsequential. Regardless of their feelings, the women who enjoyed the shows did not express anxiety about the sexualized nature of the images. The young women who felt the images were positive examples of female empowerment did not feel pressure because they were happy to embrace the definitions of empowerment presented by the shows. In other words, the conflict of interest that caused anxiety for the older women (i.e., I don’t agree with the message but I still feel pressure to conform) did not affect the younger women who agreed with the shows’ message and supported similar beliefs.

The women who responded negatively to the shows expressed concern about how the reality TV women’s choices influenced society, but did not show signs that they felt pressure to conform to the images presented in the clips. The women who responded negatively viewed the images as distortions of empowerment, rather than as something to emulate. The women relied heavily on identity constructs that bolstered their beliefs, such as religion, family values, and feminist consciousness, making it possible in their minds to resist the influence of overtly sexualized images. Although these women vocalized immunity to the images’ effects, they did express desensitization in regards to sexualized images. The women were not shocked by what they viewed, they simply chose not to embrace or engage with shows that promote self-sexualization as a means to gain financial success and celebrity status.

In contrast to acknowledged feelings of anxiety, the young women who enjoyed the shows but did not personally embrace the sex-as-power mentality, communicated a “that’s just the way it is” attitude. Some women admitted to adopting behaviors to fit into sexualized definitions of femininity, describing times in their lives when they wore clothes that were
“over the top” or “a little more sexy that I’d usually go,” or instances where they tried new beauty rituals, like hair extensions or experimenting with waxing. For some women, aesthetic self-improvement was embraced as an integral part of identity work, while for others it simply did not come up as an important part of their lives.

In contrast to the two older cohorts, the young women did not directly talk about anxiety or pressure, however, through their discussions; it became apparent that many of the young women had incorporated varying degrees of self-regulation into their everyday lives.

Steele and Brown (1995) described incorporation as a seamless process where cultivation and emotional conditioning lead to values and beliefs becoming “part of the self, often in relatively automatic, not consciously intended ways” (p. 559). The young women made comments throughout the focus groups that suggested they do feel a need to conform to certain guidelines related to what it means to project a strong, confident, self-image and that sexualized imagery plays in forming this image. For example, throughout the discussions, the young women talked about walking a fine line between sexy and “slutty,” placing themselves on a self-defined continuum informed by the shows they watch on TV. The continuum moves based on setting, mood, special events, and even holidays (think Halloween and the range of sexy fill-in-the-blank costumes).

When asked what message The Girls Next Door sends to women, Erin, 22, said: “You don’t see them getting wasted or being slutty. I mean, they do dress provocatively but that just comes with the territory of being in the Playboy mansion. I think it sends the message that you can still be beautiful and act classy and go places.”

In sum, although the young women were not as vocal about feeling pressure to conform to sexualized images of women, they were vocal about feeling pressure to embrace
sexualized images of women or risk being considered, in their words, “a prude,” “stuck up,” “too conservative,” or “not cool.” According to Durham (2008), the sexualization of women in the media “often breaks down into a good/bad dichotomy: you’re either for sex or against sex. Being at all critical or analytical of sexual representation in the media instantly seems to imply that you’re in favor of censorship and opposed to sex in general” (p. 32). The young women who enjoyed the shows were the only group to clearly avoid labeling the images used in the study as exploitation. By adopting postfeminist and neoliberal rhetoric of individualization and choice (Gill, 2007), the majority of college-aged women refused to go against the grain of popular culture, withholding judgment of sexualized images and the women promoting them.

**Conclusions re: Pressures to Conform**

The two older cohorts expressed anxiety regarding what it means to be an attractive and sexual woman in light of the dominant images they see in popular culture, images exaggerated on shows like *Keeping up with the Kardashians* and *The Girls Next Door*. The older women worried that their husbands would find these images desirable and felt pressure to “keep up” with the women they see in popular media, even the ones on reality TV. For these women, keeping up translated into trips to the plastic surgeon’s office or spa for expensive treatments and surgeries, exercise, and the adoption of the latest fashion trends. Through consumer spending, the women felt they were “grasping at straws” to stay young and desirable. Viewing habits did not moderate the women’s descriptions of pressure. Regular viewing, occasional viewing, or avoidance did not make a difference in whether the women felt pressure to conform. The women who enjoyed the shows, as well as the ones
who found them “repulsive” all experienced anxiety about the unrealistic expectations the shows promoted.

   The middle age women expressed confusion over what it means to be sexy and blamed their confusion on shows liked the ones used in this study. Although they viewed body work as superficial and materialistic, two features none of the women embraced, they still looked to the shows for guidance. The women associated a sexualized persona with freedom, defining freedom by the amount of help, time, and money the women from the shows have in maintaining their image. The women expressed feelings of envy and jealousy related to the freedom the women from the shows were afforded by their success.

   The young women did not express anxiety about feeling pressure to conform. In contrast to the two older groups, the young women expressed feeling pressure to embrace the images but rarely talked about them as disappointing, unrealistic, or anxiety-producing. The young women either celebrated the images, were complacent and accepting of the images, or they responded negatively to the images. Their overall responses impacted how they internalized the message. For example, the women who celebrated the message felt good about modeling behaviors and adopting similar beliefs, acknowledging that dressing in a sexualized way or making the most out of physical assets would benefit them. The women who identified self-sexualization as a “personal choice,” might or might not adopt behaviors or agree with the shows’ messages. In their minds, another woman’s choice had no impact on their lives. The women who responded negatively to the message did not feel pressure to conform because facets of their identities were strong enough to offset this response.
Conclusions re: Application

The goal of this section was to examine how women across generations incorporated or resisted incorporating overtly sexualized images of women into their daily lives. The women’s vocalizations about possible effects suggest that they are immune; however their discussions of the shows’ impact on their daily lives and belief systems suggest sexualized images on reality TV are influential. Women across generations expressed concern for generalizable “others,” specifically younger and less savvy female viewers, citing lack of education, lack of maturity, inability to critically view shows that are presented as reality, lack of strong family values, lack of religious commitment, and a desire for attention as reasons “others” are more affected by sexualized media content. The women also discussed how men are susceptible to sexualized media images of women, looking to those images to shape expectations, desires, and beliefs.

Based on the discussions, it would be safe to conclude that the women are indirectly affected by their perceptions of how others engage with sexualized images of women. Social comparisons with the women from the reality shows helped to uncover how the women prioritize various aspects of the sexualized imagery, or in other words, what things do the women focus on and why are these things relevant to their lives? The comparisons opened the door to feelings of pressure, which acted as a driving force for modification of beliefs and behavioral modeling.

Social comparisons impact how we learn about and see ourselves in relation to others. The women from the focus groups viewed the shows in relation to personal identity constructs. They looked at the social information presented by the shows and looked for similarities and differences between the women from the shows and themselves. The
women’s comparisons led to myriad of responses, including cognitive (i.e., self-evaluating, distorting the comparisons, refuting the comparisons), affective (i.e., feeling jealous, envious, inspired, superior, etc.), and behavioral (i.e., imitating, conforming, redefining).

The women’s responses suggest that as they watch sexualized imagery on reality TV, they engage in upward and downward social comparisons. For some women, social comparisons led to self-evaluation and for others comparisons inspired (or pressured them into) self-improvement. The young women were more likely to see self-improvement, or body work, as a type of pampering, while the older women were more likely to feel resentment that they had to engage in body work to “keep up.”

Body work, feelings of inadequacy, and the questioning and adjusting of personal definitions of what it means to be an attractive, sexy, and empowered woman are all examples of how sexualized images influenced the women’s perceptions of social reality and translated into behavior and belief modification.

The women from the two older cohorts used social comparisons with the sexualized image from the shows to question the expectations of significant others in their lives, as well as generalizable others. Milkie (1999) describes this as “reflected appraisal,” suggesting it is important to examine what women think others believe, because, in her words, “If people believe that others use such images to evaluate them, they cannot simply shift away from this constraining comparative reference” (p. 193). The women from the two older cohorts were indirectly affected by the sexualized images because they believed their husbands were also affected. The women could not easily opt out of self-evaluation because of their belief that sexualized images, however distorted, might constitute their husbands’ “fantasy” of female desirability. The older women were concerned with how their husbands made sense of the
overtly sexualized images prevalent in popular media, which led them to question their own interpretations of the images and their definitions of what it means to be sexy.

The older women identified a shift in the nature of popular culture, and felt more pressure from sexualized images than they ever had before. In other words, the women recognized that things like *Playboy* had been around for 50 plus years but instead of it being something taboo, these images now dominate television, even shows that are created to attract a female audience. In addition to their husbands, the women were also concerned about how the images affected young women and other women who were less educated, more gullible.

According to Milkie (1999), “Reflected appraisal processes are important in considering how media can affect the self indirectly, even when such images are disliked or criticized” (p. 207). The women considered the importance of the sexualized images to generalizable others, such as other women. They repeatedly considered how a generalized other interpreted the images, with a back-and-forth focus between the importance of sexualized images to them (not influential) and the importance of the images to others (influential). Throughout the discussion, the women focused on how generalized others might respond to, use, and evaluate sexualized images, reinforcing their critical interpretations of the sexualized images.

Throughout the focus groups, the young women evaluated their behaviors, problems, emotions, and physical appearance in comparison with the women from the shows. The majority of the women expressed pleasure in these comparisons, citing envy, fascination, and inspiration as pleasurable responses to engaging in upward social comparisons with the reality TV women. Downward social comparisons also led to pleasure, with many of the
young viewers looking to the images to feel more normal about their own lives or feel a sense of superiority.

For the women from the two older cohorts, a belief that important others buy into the importance of a sexualized self presentation as desirable and attainable worked to undercut their critical perspective of the images. For the younger women, a belief that generalizable others view the images as valid and desirable positioned them to withhold criticism, because in the words of one young woman, “Everyone seems to support these types of things now…I see Playboy everywhere. I’m not going to be the one who says it’s bad for someone else.” In contrast to the older cohorts, the younger women felt less pressure and were more accepting of the normalcy of seeing sexualized images on their favorite television shows.
CHAPTER 9
DISCUSSION

Many of the popular reality shows on television today portray women choosing self-sexualization as a means of gaining success. Sexualized images of women extend far beyond individual texts or celebrities, permeating a wide range of media outlets, especially media targeting female audiences (Zimmerman & Dahlberg, 2008). According to Douglas (2010): “TV serves up a menu of scripts that play a central role in shaping young people’s understanding of sex. It’s a gradual and cumulative process, and since young people still—despite Facebook and cell phones—spend more time with TV than any other mass medium, what TV conveys about girls, women and sex matters” (p. 169).

The overarching purpose of this research project was to explore how women across generations experienced popular reality television that highlights women in overtly sexualized roles. Reality television is a highly visible part of popular culture and plays an influential role in the lives of many viewers. In all three shows used in this study, the reality TV women actively engage in self-sexualization – choosing to present themselves in an overtly sexualized way. Bartky (1990) defines sexual objectification as when a woman’s sexual parts or functions are “separated out from the rest of her personality and reduced to the status of mere instruments or else regarded as if they were capable of representing her” (p. 26). In contrast, sexual subjectification suggests agency, where women actively choose to
present themselves in a sexualized manner and feel empowered by this choice. The reality TV women were vocal about how sexualized roles offer powerful subject positions for women of all ages and lead to a variety of rewards.

In the past, female objectification has been explored extensively, with a focus on how women are positioned by media texts as sex objects (Cortese, 1999; Henthorne & LaTour, 1995; Jhally, 1989; Kilbourne, 1999; Mayne, 2000). This study moved away from media images of women as sex objects and explored how women respond to seeing representations of women who believe they are taking an active role in their sexualization, women who choose to be sexual objects. The reality TV women who were the subject of this study embraced and promoted a commodified version of sexuality as a kind of female agency.

This study contributes to the conceptual groundwork necessary to understand how women across generations respond to self-sexualization in popular culture, specifically how they select, make meaning, and apply sexualized content to their lives. This study is important especially because young women growing up in the first decade of the new century have only ever experienced a media environment that exaggerates the centrality of sex and “hotness” in everyday life (Douglas, 2010, p. 182). Little is known about how they respond to and incorporate such images in their developing sense of self. In 2003, Nabi, et al. suggested that researchers focusing on reality TV should “consider exploring the more specific cognitive appraisals and emotional gratifications that might ultimately underlie the more general assessment of entertaining,” because “doing so would not only help us to better understand reality-based TV, but also enhance theory by elaborating on the emotional needs that might drive the more general social and psychological needs” (p. 326). This research answered that call by exploring how women across generations select and interact with a
popular sub-genre of reality TV, focusing on their affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses.

This project was guided by two main research questions: (1) How do women from different generations respond to the overtly sexualized images presented by women on popular reality TV programming? and, (2) Are the sexualized images prevalent on reality TV a positive site for self-expression, identity-creation, and enjoyment for female audiences? Or are they (also) a source of anxiety?

The qualitative approach was based on the understanding that representations do not merely represent the world, but are both constitutive and generative (Gill, 2008). By engaging in group interviews, the project was guided by women’s voices and descriptions, allowing for a more organic exploration of their relationship with overtly sexualized images on popular reality shows. As a result, we have gained a deeper understanding of the nuanced relationship female viewers have with popular reality TV and the women who promote and embrace sexualized self-personas.

**The Media Practice Model**

The Media Practice Model was used to explore the ways in which identity was woven through each of the following processes: (1) media selection, including gratification seeking, and more specifically the desire to escape, relax, and fulfill social needs; (2) media interaction, or the negotiation of meaning, including the women’s perceptions of realism, enjoyment, and responses to living in a sexualized culture; and, (3) media application, including third-person effects, social comparisons, and pressures to conform. This study extends existing theory by exploring the moments of the Media Practice Model extensively and more thoroughly than has been done before.
The women who participated in this study used various elements of their identities to engage with the shows, including their gender, age, religion, education, values, feminist consciousness, sensitivity to sexualized images, etc. These points of reference helped to explain why they chose certain shows to watch regularly, how overtly sexualized images made them feel, how they identified and made sense of the dominant messages, how they applied the messages to their lives, who they thought would be affected by the messages, and how the messages impacted their own beliefs and behaviors.

Media selection and interaction were both guided by facets of the women’s identities. Frequent viewers who enjoyed the shows experienced them in a different way than the women who enjoyed them sporadically, tolerated them, or did not enjoy them at all. The older women enjoyed the shows primarily as an escape, both from the worries of their lives and the people in their lives. For them, the viewing experience was a solitary activity, one that evoked both feelings of shame and pleasure. The younger women, in contrast, enjoyed the shows to relax and pass time, and looked to the shows to provide an added element of sociality to their lives. Sociality was enhanced through the act of watching in a social environment as well as the discussions young women had with friends and family after watching the shows. The young women did not express feelings of shame or anxiety related to viewing, accepting both reality TV and sexualized images as a normal part of everyday life.

For some women facets of identity offered them a buffer to the appeal of sex-as-power imagery. For example, women for whom Christian faith was an important component of identity were more successful in avoiding images they felt were exploitive and harmful. Women who held a feminist consciousness often had trouble engaging in the shows because
of the disconnect between self-defined feminist beliefs and the exploitative nature of the shows. Some of the women who expressed a commitment to family values described being turned off by the images presented on the shows, avoiding them because they contradicted the values they were taught by their parents or the values they hoped to pass along to their children. Older women were more likely to avoid shows that incorporated elements of what they viewed as pornography, while younger women who had grown up in an overtly sexualized media culture were more likely to embrace them or view them as normal.

Values and personal identity are linked at the theoretical level through authenticity (Hitlin, 2003). According to Grecas (1991) authenticity is a primary self-motive, meaning that people feel authentic when they embrace behavior that is in line with their own values. This proved to be true for the women who participated in this study. The women who articulated a strong value system that was at odds with what they viewed in the clips had problems embracing the shows and the reality TV women. The women who did not consistently bring up their values were less likely to respond strongly (negatively or positively) to the reality TV women.

For the older women who enjoyed the shows, the conflict between identity constructs and sexualized images led to feelings of anxiety, described as apprehension, pressure, disappointment, unease, and concern. The women adopted avoidance tactics that allowed them to downplay the shows’ messages and focus instead on the pleasure they experienced from their “break from everyday life.”

A few young women embraced the shows’ messages and the self-sexualization presented by the reality TV women. They rarely spoke of conflicts between identity constructs and the shows’ messages, did not describe feeling anxious about their engagement
with the shows, and supported elements of traditional femininity, such as a focus on beauty, care, and sexiness. The young women who embraced the shows also promoted a definition of individualized empowerment, exemplified by individual choice rather than collective change. The women who embraced sex-as-power imagery accepted the shows’ call to view individual acts of style, rhetoric, and self-promotion as indicators of power. The young women accepted self-sexualization as a valid means for attaining autonomy, financial self-sufficiency, and celebrity status, all things valued by the young women who embraced the shows’ messages.

The women’s responses are important because they shed light on how women across age cohorts, with different identity constructs, who have grown up in different media cultures, negotiate meaning when faced with representations of an overtly sexualized female subject position. The reality shows used in this study position women to view the feminine body as marketable and profitable. According to Woodward (1997): “Representation as a cultural process establishes individual and collective identities and symbolic systems provide possible answers to the questions: who am I?; what could I be?; who do I want to be?” (p. 14). Similarly, Gledhill (1997) suggested: “Representations address us in the practices of everyday life even while calling on our subjective sense of self and our fantasies,” helping us to define what it means to be a woman and how we relate to those around us (p. 339).

Through comparison with the reality TV women, many of the women in this study engaged in identity work while watching the reality TV shows, leading to self-evaluation and often self-transformative behaviors.

According to Cohen (2001), “Identifying with media others allows us to experience social reality from other perspectives and, thus, shapes the development of self-identity and social attitudes” (p. 246). I would argue that through upward and downward social
comparisons with the reality TV women, the women from this study who watched regularly consciously or subconsciously used the shows to shape social attitudes and inform behaviors.

Most of the women felt they were not affected by sexualized images of women on reality TV. Women across cohorts expressed power over the media and over sexualized representations of women, instead focusing on third-person effects. Many of the women felt that younger, more naïve, and less educated women do not have the “where-with-all” to critically engage with sexualized images in popular culture. Third-person effects gave the women who were critical of the shows’ messages a false sense of protection. This mentality, which is adopted to “affirm viewers’ power,” allowed the women to feel pleasure because they thought they were capable of reading against the grain (Douglas, 2009, p. 15).

**Pleasurable Experiences at a Price**

Although the women felt they were immune, the seductive nature of the shows worked to chip away at critical perspectives. Cultivation theory suggests that long-term exposure to television has subtle and cumulative effects that shape audiences’ views of social reality. The women who frequently watched reality TV were more accepting of the sexualized images presented on the shows and were more likely to adopt the televised ideals as their own, exemplified in their decisions to engage in body work and re-think their definitions of what it means to be sexy.

Social cognitive theory helped make sense of the ways in which the women from the focus groups learned from the sexualized programs. As Social Cognitive Theory would predict, the women who frequently viewed sex-as-power representations began to incorporate behaviors that focused primarily on sexuality and body as a means to feel good about themselves. The older women primarily adopted behaviors that were in conflict with
personal beliefs because they felt pressure to live up to the standards TV presents as attractive and sexy.

Enjoying images of self-sexualization as a form of empowerment had different implications for women across generations. Pleasure was a driving force for the women who embraced the messages presented in the shows used for this study, as well as the women who were able to downplay the messages and enjoy the shows despite the contradiction between personal values and beliefs and the beliefs and values presented on the shows.

According to Walters (1995): “One could reasonably argue that ‘pleasure’ has become the new catchword of feminist cultural theory in an attempt to displace the emphasis on negative and oppressive images and construct instead a discourse that centers on the liberating possibilities of female viewing practices and pleasures” (p.89). For the older women, it would be misleading to say the pleasure they experienced when watching the shows was liberating. The underlying anxiety related to the exploitative features of the shows, as well as the resulting pressure they felt, was an issue for the women from the two older cohorts. Although the women were able “zone out” and feel pleasure, their descriptions did not indicate the process was liberating for them.

In contrast, some of the younger women described their pleasure, as well as the images, as liberating, suggesting that women have made progress in their ability to express themselves both sexually and “on their own terms.” Based on the variations across generations, frequently viewing sexualized media content worked to desensitize the women to sexualized imagery, undercutting critical perspectives by fostering an attitude of complacency and acceptance.
The representation of sexualized bodies, which conformed to narrow standards that necessitated body work, promoted commodification as an important and enjoyable aspect of femininity. Feminine ideologies promoted by the shows were internalized by the women who participated in this study, even the ones who viewed the shows from a critical perspective. Ideologies or “a system of ideas and representations which dominate the mind” provide a guide for individuals as they construct their identities (Althusser, 1971, pg. 158). Most of the women engaged in some form of body work, ranging from working out, to waxing, to plastic surgery. The women from the older groups described feeling pressure to conform, while the women from the younger groups described body work as an enjoyable and natural part of being a woman. These findings support Gauntlett’s (2002) suggestion that “information and ideas from the media do not merely reflect the social world, but contribute to its shape and are central to modern reflexivity.”

**Postfeminist Ideology**

In the reality shows used for this study, objectification has been reframed as sexual subjectification and positioned viewers to embrace a commodified and sexualized version of femininity, one maintained through self-regulation. According to Douglas (2010), “Reality TV promotes a turn within, a gazing at our navels, a fixation with our bodies and relationships, and the ideology of individualism” (p. 212). Sexualized subjectification is predicated on the basis that there is no longer a need for feminism because gender equality has been achieved (Coy & Garner, 2010). The focus on individualization and self-sufficiency works to re-regulate women through a language of choice (McRobbie, 2004). This study provided a look at how women across generations responded to seeing a postfeminist text.
where sex-as-power imagery is framed as subjectification rather than objectification and that is expressed through a rhetoric of choice.

The women from the two older cohorts did not view sexual subjectification as a form of empowerment, citing a number of reasons why the reality TV women’s use of a sexualized persona to sell themselves is an example of exploitation. The women who responded negatively to the shows’ messages were critical of self-sexualization and felt the images from the shows were informed by masculine constructions of female sexuality, rather than authentic expressions of desire and sexuality. In contrast, the majority of the young women embraced the rhetoric of choice, individualism, and self-sexualization as a valid path to empowerment, withholding criticism of the reality TV women’s choices. The difference between generations suggests many young women are buying into the postfeminist rhetoric prevalent on reality TV and elsewhere in popular culture, that there is no need for feminism because individual women can accomplish anything they set their minds to.

A model of individualization is prevalent in most post-feminist texts, such as the shows used in this study. These types of shows are often identified by scholars as a consequence of postfeminist and neoliberal ideology, and are blamed for leading young women to value personal success and achievement rather than to engage in a collective assessment of oppressive social structures (Harris, 2004). The women’s reactions to the models of individualization prevalent on the shows used for this study speak to their beliefs about women’s roles and the implications of personal decisions. The young women from the focus groups were more likely to embrace a model of individualization focused on choice and individual definitions of empowerment. The older women were more likely to reject it.
For example, Ali, 21, said: “If they’re making a choice, are they really being exploited? I think it would be interesting to ask them 20 years down the line if this is something they would do again. If they look back and they’re still firm in that decision. You know, that doesn’t even really matter, I still don’t think they’re being exploited, because, you know, that’s really what they want to do.”

In contrast, Cindy, 48, said: “These women are being exploited. All three of them. They might not think so, but they are. They’re doing a disservice to all women by presenting themselves in this way. Their decisions affect us all, how people view us as women, what they expect from us. It matters.”

Many of the older women experienced a sense of internal discord while engaging with sexualized media culture, questioning the commodified versions of femininity that were presented as normal. According to Gill (2008), “Women must now understand their own objectification as pleasurable and self-chosen,” (p.45) or they will be categorized as outdated and irrelevant. The younger women were more willing to accept self-sexualization as self-chosen, whereas, the older women were more likely to recognize the social structures that drive and reward exploitation that they described as promoting “unfair” and “degrading” expectations of women.

Coy and Garner (2010) asked the question: Does the sexualization of culture represent and recreate a “liberatory loosening of constraints or the mainstreaming of subordination for women?” (p. 659). The women from the two older groups felt the sexualized nature of popular culture is more constraining than liberating, identifying it as a narrow, clichéd version of sexiness as opposed to an example of authentic sexuality. The
younger women were more varied in their responses, with most viewing it as an acceptable choice, at least for other women, if not themselves.

Feminist consciousness-raising, mainly through women studies courses, helped create a small group of young resisters who self-identified as feminists and were less susceptible to the sex-as-power norms. These young women identified the shows as “sexist,” and viewed them as examples of exploitation, expressing the belief that feminism is still relevant. This speaks to the protective power of education for young women who are presented with a sexualized media diet throughout their lives. Education, along with a push for more diverse programming, is crucial in countering the prevalence of sexualized images.

**Final Thoughts**

In sum, the shows used in this study shape the cultural landscape women inhabit and subsequently their sense of self. The producers of reality TV shows have been successful in creating shows that are explicit yet accessible to and popular with a wide range of women. The shows incorporate and repackage sexualized images of women in a fun, safe, and unthreatening way. The shows have successfully commodified femininity, encouraging women to engage in consumer spending through body work, fashion decisions, and maintenance to fully embrace a sexualized feminine subjectivity. According to Douglas (2009):

> Women can play sports, excel at school, got to college, aspire to – and get – jobs previously reserved for men, be working mothers, and so forth. But in exchange, we must obsess about our faces, weight, breast size, clothing brands, decorating, perfectly calibrated child-rearing, about pleasing men and being envied by other women. And we should expect no support from the government or our workplaces.
when it comes to juggling work and family because that’s just a personal ‘choice’ we made, and should live with it (p. 16).

The older women recognized the pressures Douglas described above, while the younger women seemed to accept them as “just the way it is.” These differences suggest that media cultures influence identity work, media interpretations, and the ways women apply what they view to their lives. The women repeatedly described the effects of growing up in different media cultures, which influenced how they responded to the current media world. But even the older women were affected by the shows. It was clear that the shows desensitize viewers and chip away at any resistance they might feel to the shows’ pull, undercutting their ability to develop and maintain a critical perspective.

It is important to note that critical perspectives did not consistently translate into resistance. Audience-centered research often suggests that critical readings help viewers resist influence (Livingstone, 1998). For many of the women from the focus groups, however, a critical reading did not provide a sufficient buffer. In fact, the contradiction between viewing the shows critically and experiencing them as pleasurable caused feelings of anxiety for many of the older women. This anxiety, which was described as feelings of conflict, apprehension, pressure, and unease, often led the women to question personal definitions and adopt behaviors that contradicted their beliefs.

This study addressed a cultural trend – the self-sexualization of women as a form of empowerment – that continues to permeate media images of women of all ages. According to Gill (2008), a key challenge of research that focuses on self-sexualization as empowerment is to “understand how this disciplinary power works, exploring the complex relation between culture and subjectivity in such a way as to render women neither passive, docile subjects,
nor the fictitious autonomous, freely choosing persons of liberal humanism” (p. 40). Rather than focus on how various texts position women or the underlying ideological messages inherent in texts, this study addressed the ways in which women from different generations experience sex-as-power imagery.

The findings of this study suggest that the sexualized individualism celebrated by the women on reality TV serves to mask gender inequalities, undercut critical perspectives, and promotes a postfeminist and neoliberal mentality. Despite what is communicated in popular media, gender inequalities do still exist. A 2009 poll found that 60 percent of men and 50 percent of women believed that women do not face any barriers in the workplace. This mentality is expressed by men and women living in a country where women still on average make 75 cents to a man’s dollar, less if you are an African American or Latina woman (Douglas, 2010). According to the National Center for Injury and Prevention and Control, women experience about 4.8 million intimate partner-related physical assaults and rapes every year in the United States. The United States also boasts a lack luster support network for mothers and children. In light of these inequalities, it becomes harder to accept the media’s continued representation of female empowerment as an individual process which can be achieved through a sexualized self-presentation. The sexualized representations position women to look inward instead of outward, constantly scrutinizing and transforming their bodies through consumption practices, all the while eroding self-esteem.

Sexualized images of women in reality TV cannot be passed off as “just mindless fluff,” or we miss an opportunity to understand how women of all ages use these shows to shape their aspirations, sense of self, and perceptions of what it means to be a woman in today’s society. Television shows that viewers pass off as inconsequential cannot be ignored
because as McRobbie (2004) reminded us “relations of power are indeed made and remade within texts of enjoyment and rituals of relaxation and abandonment” (p. 262).

**Limitations of this study**

*Focus group interviews are shaped by social context.* It is hard to know if and how much of the discussions were shaped by the presence of peers. And, given that media consumption is often a social activity, the focus group format may have contributed to a more naturalistic viewing context. The discussions in each of the groups were robust, suggesting that women felt free to offer a variety of opinions and viewpoints. It appeared that pressure toward normative effects were avoided by the homogeneity of the small groups in which the women felt secure expressing themselves. The group setting seemed to foster more rather than less discussion and a wide variety of opinions.

It is also hard to know if and how much of the discussions were shaped by my role as a Ph.D. candidate conducting media research on the topic of sexualized images of women. At the beginning of the groups, I explained to the women that I was in the final stages of getting my Ph.D. in mass communication. I did not disclose my personal beliefs regarding feminism, however, I would have to assume that the nature of my topic would suggest that I care about women’s issues and the ways women are portrayed in the media. Going into the interviews, I worried that this might affect the women’s responses in a negative way. I was relieved to find that the discussions across groups were consistently open and comfortable. Almost all of the women seemed at ease and often surprised me with their candor – whether it was the young women’s acceptance and embracing of the sexualized shows or the older women’s confessions regarding body work. I worked hard to create an environment that fostered open
discussion, hiding my shock at some of the responses and asking a lot of clarifying questions to make sure I understood the women’s responses and word use.

**Future Research**

Longitudinal work with women of all ages is necessary to substantiate the extent to which women are affected by the overtly sexualized media content that currently permeates television. Focus on the women who embrace and enjoy these portrayals would be especially valuable. The findings of this study suggest that as popular culture has become more sexualized, young women have grown desensitized to what they see and have begun to adopt the values and beliefs communicated. As younger generations are exposed earlier and more thoroughly, their level of desensitization and the ways in which they make sense out of overtly sexualized imagery needs to be examined through audience-centered research over a longer period. Additionally, research should be conducted in the women’s natural settings. A more thorough examination is needed of the ways in which women appropriate and incorporate what they view into their identities and behaviors.

The women from the focus groups expressed concern for younger audiences: high school, middle school, and grade school girls. They suggested that younger women and girls lack the maturity and life experiences to engage with sexualized imagery in an appropriate manner. Research focusing on how younger women deal with sexualized images in reality TV is needed to explore possible differences between women who are still living at home with their parents, who are engaging in significant identity work, and who have been exposed to sexualized imagery for most of their lives. Qualitative research with women from different socioeconomic and racial backgrounds and sexual orientations would also provide a deeper understanding of how overtly-sexualized imagery is processed and applied.
For many of the women who participated in this study, motherhood was a central theme that influenced their response to the shows and the sexualized images of the women presented on the shows. After the focus groups took place, two of the women from the three shows used in this study became mothers. Kendra, from The Girls Next Door, now stars in her own reality show documenting her marriage to NFL player Hank Baskett, her first pregnancy, as well as her day-to-day life as a new mother. Kourtney, Kim Kardashian’s older sister, also documented her pregnancy and the birth of her first child on Keeping up with the Kardashians. Many of the women from the younger focus groups questioned how women who use their sexuality to gain success would make the transition into marriage and motherhood. Future research should focus on how young women respond to seeing a former Playboy model juggle marriage and motherhood while still presenting a sexualized persona.

In conclusion, future studies need to focus on how narratives of femininity are produced in media, negotiated through culture, and experienced by real women in their everyday lives. This study shows how important sexualized media images are in shaping women’s everyday lives. There is a notable shift in the way power operates, “moving from an external male-judging gaze to a self-policing narcissistic gaze,” representing a more advanced form of exploitation (Gill, 2009).

In the words of Amy, 21, “Pretty much every girl I know would trade places with a Kardashian.” When I asked Amy why she thought women would want to trade places, she said, “The freedom, the lifestyle. They get to do whatever they want, buy whatever they want, travel. They’re sexy. They’re beautiful. Who wouldn’t want that?” Such comments make it clear that continued critical examination of the sexualized nature of popular culture,
and specifically the reality TV genre, which is widely consumed by women of all ages, is more necessary than ever.
References


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