Our Voices

Anna Walser with Courtney Gazda, Christopher McNeil, Taryn Mogavero, Sarah Mae Richens, Nicole Posluszny, Emily Tanner

We invite you to join us, many voices as one, to challenge those systems that oppress us all. In this work we aim to discuss the place that we hold within our community, focusing on identity, choice, ownership, and the mass media. Let us dissent against the social limitations and expectations and raise awareness of the intersectional ties that connect all people. Through our own feminist research, we use Dissenting Voices to highlight the social issues of today.

Cover Design:

Artist: Christopher McNeil
Electronic Art Editor: Taryn Mogavero

Dissenting Voices, v. 4, issue 1, Spring 2015
Note from the Editor

I am thrilled to introduce volume four of Dissenting Voices, a student engineered e-Journal collaboratively designed, authored, and published by undergraduate Women and Gender Studies majors as an extension of their Women and Gender Studies Senior Seminar at The College at Brockport.

Dissenting Voices grows out of a course learning structure where Women and Gender Studies students reflect upon their undergraduate experience in the discipline, and through engagement, activism, and synthesis of acquired knowledge, establish a theoretical foundation to inform future feminist practices. Course readings comprise students’ discipline-specific interests, enabling an intellectual forum in which the students dialogue on a women and gender focused topic. This work culminates in a meaningful capstone project grounded in contemporary and emerging feminist scholarship.

Dissenting Voices volume four captures seven diverse authors who employ traditional essay format to straddle an array of topics important to the Women and Gender Studies discipline. Two leading authors showcase the volume. These opening voices include an auto-ethnographic essay that uses queer and anarchist theory to examine ways fat oppression is linked to capitalism followed by an essay that teases out the erosion of intersectionality in postfeminism with a focus on representations of women as portrayed in popular music. Continuing with more voices, five submissions, varied in scope, address Disney Princesses and the Reproduction of Gender Roles, Rape Culture, Title IX and Campus Awareness, Sexual Assault in the Military, and Body Image and Self-loathing on Instagram.

Standing on the shoulders of prior Dissenting Voices authors, volume four interrogates the power structures that press down on and border-cross the margins under which we live and learn. Students’ writing analyzes rigid societal codes that inscribe identity and exposes societal structures and policies that complicate gender equality measures. Whether research scrutinizes body oppressions, critiques race and gender performed in popular culture, dissects behaviors around gender-based violence, or assesses military transgressions in policing sexual assault, writers in this volume ask, where has society failed us, how can we become better informed on these failings, and how might we...
deploy progressive women and gender-produced knowledge to leverage and mobilize social change?

Similar to prior semesters, and as an extension of in-class work, students staged several activist projects including a One Billion Rising Revolution flash mob, a trans-awareness Origami Swan Project, an International Women’s Day salon, a collaboratively designed Clothesline Project installation, and a worker’s rights rally for the Fight for 15. The e-Journal concludes with a photo essay that documents our women and gender-informed activism. Bridging theory with praxis, Dissenting Voices preserves the authenticity of student voice, sanctioning a wide range of ability and talent that students’ senior seminar coursework engenders.

In my early role as Brockport’s Women and Gender Studies Director and faculty developing a new Women and Gender Studies senior capstone course, I had what seemed a pipedream in conceptualizing a student journal. Semesters of dynamic student activism and thought inspired me to imagine a women and gender studies publication that would bring to light undergraduate creative agency realized on the cusp of feminist knowledge. Dissenting Voices, as named and populated by its 2012 student founders, and pioneered onward by this 2015 class, is this dream forward.

Barbara LeSavoy, PhD
Director, Women and Gender Studies
Executive Editor, Dissenting Voices
Opening Voices

Adiposity and Anarchism: Exposing and Examining Fat Oppression in a Capitalist Society ........................................ 1
Sarah Mae Richens

The Color of Postfeminism: Representations of Black and White Women in Popular Music Videos ........................................ 13
Anna Walser

More Voices

The (de)Evolution of the Disney Princess ........................................ 29
Courtney Gazda

Voices Carry: Understanding Rape Culture’s Identity in Society .......... 47
Nicole Posluszny

The U.S. Military’s Invisible War: Midshipmen Perspectives .......... 69
Christopher McNeil

Title IX: What Students Think They Know ........................................ 87
Taryn Mogavero

Appendix A, Title IX, Education Amendments of 1972 ............. 97
Appendix B, Declaration of Sentiments ........................................ 102

Girls, Instagram, and the Glamorization of Self-loathing ............ 105
Emily Tanner

Appendix A, Suggested Resources ........................................ 120

WMS 421 Spring 2015 Activism Photo Essay .................................... 121

One Billion Rising: V-Day Stop Violence against Women
International Women’s Day
The Clothesline Project
Origami Swan Project
Fight for 15
Adiposity and Anarchism: 
Exposing and Examining Fat 
Oppression in a Capitalist Society

“No real social change has ever come about without a revolution [. . .] revolution is but 
thought carried into action.”

(Emma Goldman, Anarchism and Other Essays, 1910)

This is an auto-ethnographic essay looking at the ways in which fat oppression is linked to capitalism. 
This research looks at oppression and discrimination stemming from adiposity (fatness) through an 
anarchist and queer theory perspective. There is a void of research and writing on the intersections of fat 
oppression, from an anarchist and queer theory perspective, yet many fat studies researchers have found 
that fatness is oppressive, discriminating and affects ones socioeconomic status. In the white supremacist, 
capitalist heteropatriarchy that we live in, there is a systematic ‘othering’ of anyone who does not fit 
inside the mold that society lays out for us. This work looks at the binary systems that society is built 
around and aims to disrupt them.
Trifecta: A Fat, Anarchist, Feminist

I’m a fat girl. I have a body that will probably always be fat, and in the past thirty-two years, I have experienced a number of obstacles that have been either directly or indirectly related to the shape and size of my body. Society plays a large role structuring the ways we view bodies and what we think are “acceptable” sizes and presentations of bodies. In contemporary American culture we are socialized to think of beauty as a narrow pathway between thin and slightly curvaceous, almost exclusively light-skinned and submissive. For those of us who do not fit inside this very small box, we are given ample opportunity to assimilate, at a cost. If we fail or reject assimilation, however, we take on the role of the outsider. This idea of beauty that groups, ranging from schoolgirls to gender scholars, have examined can be a very isolating frame. I can speak from experience that fat girls don’t fit the beauty ideal in American culture, even though we are beautiful human beings.

I’m also an anarchist. Maybe you raised your brow at that, and wondered where the hell I am going with this and what does anarchism have to do with body size. Many people envision the stereotypical trope of what an anarchist does and looks like—someone thought to defy all authority, dress in black attire, and smash the windows of retail establishments and department stores. Of course, these types of insurrectionary anarchists do exist and have their role in society and the anarchist movement. As representatives of the movement, however, insurrectionists are not a fair portrayal. Anarchists are—for the most part—organizers working together toward challenging and destabilizing hierarchies set up by oppressive political, economic, and social systems and structures. Anarchists are actively taking part both in social movements and in academia, highlighting the many places where the institutions that we live under are both exploitative and oppressive, and how living in a white supremacist, capitalist, heteronormative, patriarchy is detrimental to individuals as well as society as a whole. Anarchist thinker and activist Alexander Berkman (1929) said that anarchism is not about bombs, murder, chaos or robbery; “[I]t is not a return to barbarism or the wild state of man…Anarchism means that you should be free; that no one should enslave you, boss you, rob you, or impose on you” (p. 2). Anarchists work toward building a world that is free of hierarchies, exploitation and
oppression. We strive to live in a world that sees each and every one of us as equals. We are not just consumers or products; we are individuals who have a yearning to be free.

An auto-ethnographic study of my own evolution into being the person I have become is the skeleton of this case study and this paper. I have walked through life being ashamed of my size, and it has taken me years to get to the point where I am at today. No matter what your ‘difference’ is, if your body, personality, sexuality, and so forth fall outside mainstream categories of identity – the capitalist heteropatriarchy that we live in actively ‘others’ you. These are my words, I have found my voice, and this is my declaration of existence – as a fat, queer, anarcha-feminist. As Nomy Lamm (1995) discusses in her essay “It’s a Big Fat Revolution,” there is importance in telling your own story and expressing your experience. As my personal story as a fat girl has changed over the years and I have moved on to a place of acceptance – even if that acceptance ebbs and flows, I still scream into the darkness that I am valid, beautiful, intelligent and worthy of existing – on my own terms.

Anarchism against Body Oppression

At its heart, anarchism is reaching for a new society that is equitable and just. For those new to anarchist ideology, this vision may be hard to fully understand and envision. But anarchists understand that these challenges result from the oppression that one experiences while living in a capitalist, white supremacist, heteropatriarchical system. Anarchism is staunchly anti-capitalist. And while an ultimate goal of anarchist practice and ideology is to dismantle capitalism, anarchists understand that this goal should not cause us to disregard other forms of oppression. “The political task according to contemporary anarchism is to attack all forms of oppression, not just the ‘main’ one, because without an attack on hierarchy itself, other forms of opposition, will not necessarily wither away after capitalism (or patriarchy or colonialism) is destroyed” (Olson, 2009, p. 37). Drawing from what Olson states about disrupting and attacking the hierarchies and oppressions we face (all of them—not just one), we can apply these ideas to a consideration of bodies, embodiment, and hierarchies established surrounding the social construction of the body.

I am particularly interested in the ways in which capitalism reinforces what bodies should look like, how they
should function, and what they should do. We see this push in capitalist society for the ideal body and what is deemed acceptable by standards set by those in power. Standards of beauty play an integral role in perpetuating inequalities. But because they are so taken for granted, the standards themselves are not always noticed as the source of many people’s collective pain and anxiety. Regardless of gender, race, or class, the body is policed and also labeled as either “right” or “wrong.” Corporations are making money off of our bodies, whether it is from our labor or spending/wasting our time trying to achieve an unattainable image that has been manufactured for us to idealize.

While anarchists are not devoid of talking about bodies, it is largely from the aspect of gender and not size. Rethinking the way that capitalism has created a space of not only self-hatred, shame, oppression, and inequality, but also how it perpetuates these oppressions on a daily basis for us, as fat people, is very similar to the ways in which it oppresses us in all of the classical ways anarchists study—as laborers, through a gendered and racialized perspective, and of course, a class perspective. Fat acceptance is intertwined with class struggle.

In a capitalist society, we are all either products or consumers (sometimes both). We are all sold a false notion of what the “perfect size” is and then told that we must stop at nothing to reach this unattainable goal. In this endless stream of advertisements, we are not only shown what we should be; we buy into the idea of hating ourselves. The negative self-talk that comes from living in a capitalist society hell-bent on selling us something to change our bodies is beyond self-destructive. As Nomy Lamm (1995) argues in her essay, “It’s a Big Fat Revolution,” it is a revolutionary act to love and accept yourself in a society that labels you as an “Other” or an outsider. We must fight against systems of domination and oppression such as racism, ableism, heterosexism, sexism and also, fat oppression. Anarchism argues for the destruction of capitalist society and to build one not based on hierarchies. In place of these systems of hierarchy, anarchists propose a human community based on autonomy, solidarity and mutual aid (Daring, Rogue, Shannon & Volcano, 2013, p. 8). While we anarchists fight state oppression, we also struggle against all forms of oppression.

Fat individuals are dehumanized on a regular basis in capitalist society. They
are the subject of jokes, bullying, and ridicule on a regular basis—patterned inequality and abuse reinforced by socialization and the media as an acceptable way in which to treat people who do not have what is considered an “acceptable” body size. Life does not happen inside of a vacuum and we experience the world in very different ways based on our identities. As a fat woman, strangers suggest ways that I can become “healthier” when they know nothing of my health. It is an interesting dynamic being a fat woman who is also a sexual being, because I am usually either seen as completely asexual and devoid of any attractive markers, or I am fetishized and those who do find me attractive hide it for fear of the backlash they will receive. Fatness carries with it a social stigma of being unworthy, lazy, uneducated, ugly, unhealthy, and countless other negative, and largely false descriptors (Burgard, 2009). We are socialized to view fat individuals in this light. We live in a world that does not let fat people fit into it, whether we are speaking literally such as the desks in classrooms or airplane seats; politically, where politicians are policing our bodies, food intake, and shaming us; or figuratively, where corporations are rubbing their hands together hoping that we hate ourselves enough to buy into the new fad diet.

Anarchism, Fat Feminism and Queer Theory

Queer theory is, in part, based on the perspective of looking at identities that are non-normative or those that veer away from the standardized expectations associated with how people should act, what they should look like, and how they should live their lives. Simply put, queer theory looks at the world, as bell hooks (1984) puts it, “from margin to center.” Looking at adiposity, or fatness, from a queer perspective highlights the ways that people are marginalized and “othered” based on the size and shape of their body. Contemporary society thrives on binaries rather than on a spectrum when it comes to many identities and bodies. Within these binaries, we see what is labeled as either “normal” or “abnormal.” When society dictates what is “normal” rather than accepting and allowing for a variation, hierarchies emerge.

In “Fattening Queer History” (2009), Levy-Navarro speaks to queering and queer as an inclusive, non-normative/challenging normativity, including fat people. In her piece she references the need for a “historical
turn in fat studies” (p. 17) because history is used to debase the non-normative [LGBTQ and fat folk]. The need to queer fat history is to not only to give fat people a voice but also to acknowledge their right to existence and to understand the lives, the struggles, and the oppressions they have endured and continue to face. “Queer scholars readily acknowledge that it is the linear nature of modern time that makes the lesbian, the queer, the transgendered [and I’d add, the fat] an afterthought” (p. 17). For example, “modern linear time always sees lesbian identity as literally of inconsequence because she is positioned outside this sequential ordering” (Levy-Navarro, 2009, p. 17). There has been a historical and also contemporary othering of anything and anyone that/who does not fit inside the constructed boxes and bodies that capitalist society has constructed for them. Therefore, when you do not fit inside that mold, you are merely an afterthought, never at the forefront of what society views as acceptable or even “normal.”

Research has shown that fatness is linked to socioeconomic status. “Poverty has been strongly linked to low-quality nutrition, which can result in weight gain because excess calories must be consumed to maintain adequate intake of vital nutrients. Household income is highly correlated with diet quality” (Ernsberger, 2009, p. 26). Impoverished neighborhoods are much more likely to be “food deserts”—geographic spaces in which highly nutritious foods are scarce and, when present, are often more expensive than mass produced food. Ernsberger’s work speaks to the fact that fatness is actually impoverishing as many plus-sized people are discriminated against because of their size. This illustrates how fatness and class are related, but, beyond that, illustrates that they can both be seen as playing a role in causing and being caused by the other—they exhibit a quality social scientists refer to as “reciprocal effects.” This means that it is critically important to ask two questions at the same time: (1) Why are poor people more likely to be fat?, and (2) Why are fat people more likely to be poor? While many might understand some of the ways that poverty could play a role in causing fatness, fewer consider the ways that fatness can lead to poverty.

An astonishing longitudinal study of fat and thin teenagers that then followed up with the same individuals seven years later found very different circumstances: Ernsberger (2009) found that roughly one quarter of fat young
women were married after seven years compared to more than half of thin women. He found that fat young women only earned roughly two-thirds of the income that thin women did in the sample, and thus, were much more likely to live in poverty. This was partially accounted for by the fact that fat young women in the sample were dramatically less likely to obtain a college degree (p. 27). In the same study Ernsberger drew correlations between gender and class and found that the relationship between fatness and impoverishment was less pronounced among men in the study; but, fat men were in similar situations compared to thin men of the same study. Perhaps most telling, thin subjects were found to be in better socioeconomic situations than fat participants even after controlling for a variety of variables, including intelligence. Intelligence may have helped thin women and men get out of poverty, but intelligence did not work the same way for fat individuals. The study also controlled for self-esteem and ruled this variable out as being a factor explaining lower socioeconomic status. The study also examined fatness and health, asking if impoverishment was caused by chronic illness usually related to weight. They found that the young people were no more likely than others to have chronic health conditions. “When they looked at young people who really did have chronic health problems like asthma, diabetes, or epilepsy, the rates of marriage and college completion and levels of income were completely unaffected” (Ernsberger, 2009, p. 27). What this means is that being fat had more of an affect on life options and life trajectories than did things like asthmas, diabetes, and epilepsy. In this study, impoverishment was not shown to stem from health conditions, but prejudice. People at the bottom of the social strata are far more likely to be overweight or fat than those in the upper class. And this issue is also gendered; women are more affected than are men.

A Paradox: Invisible and Hyper-visible

Not only does fatness impact the socioeconomic status of individuals, but also their health, advocacy, and awareness. Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS) is an illness that impacts many plus size women and approximately between 6-10 percent of women could be diagnosed as having PCOS (Fisanick, 2009). Because many of the women with this endocrine disorder are also fat women, the illness...
often goes undiagnosed and untreated for long periods of time. Christine Fisanick (2009) explains in “Fatness (In)visible: Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome and the Rhetoric of Normative Femininity” how this fact impacts women’s lives and forces them to challenge what femininity is and what it looks like. Some of the outward and social symptoms of PCOS are weight gain, hair loss on the head, excessive facial and body hair, and infertility. Sufferers of PCOS embody a different vision of what femininity is, and along with that, they can face discrimination and scrutiny.

In her work, Fisanick (2009) references the national non-profit started to raise awareness about PCOS and to put a face to the illness. Even though the woman chosen as the first spokesperson for PCOS did suffer from the illness—she also went to great lengths and had the access to medical care to seek treatment that does not work for all sufferers. Once she became the face of PCOS, it was clear that those in charge of the campaign were aiming to get an acceptable model for their cause, and not a “true face” of PCOS sufferers. The treatment that she endured, while helping her, removed many of the aspects that make the illness visible to others—rendering what the syndrome looks like for most women who suffer with the condition invisible. This speaks volumes to the aspects of being both invisible and hyper-visible that women and plus size women endure on a daily basis, rendering many silent and invisible; their image being altered in order to be seen as acceptable for societal consumption. This again goes back to the socially acceptable notion of femininity, which is led, not only by constructed images that we see and enforce, but also by the capitalist endeavors that work solely in self-interest and for profit.

Even though PCSOA is a non-profit organization, they found a spokesperson who would fit their mold of an ideal beautiful woman and bring in more monetary donations and interest to their cause. Plus size people should never be silenced or rendered invisible, perhaps most particularly not when they are the focus of the cause and task at hand. We see this same issue among models in the fashion industry as well where “plus size” models are very similar to average size models, in that they do not accurately represent the size of many actual plus size people. These aims are all focused around profit and capitalist gain, helping to produce the feeling that we do not fit
inside a mold, and not only that, but that we should fit inside and to which we should be constantly striving to conform. Thus, the rich continue to get richer and fat individuals are feeling the pressure to fit in and to try to change themselves while also being told that their bodies, their illnesses, and they themselves are not good enough to fight for or accept.

Using the fields of anarchism, fat studies and queer studies, this is an auto-ethnographic investigation of the intersections of these three interdisciplinary fields—a reflection on my own personal experience and its relevance to these intersections. By critically interrogating my own embodiment, I illustrate the value in examining these intersections in more detail. Throughout my life, I have had my gender questioned based on the size of my body and the way in which I dress. When I walk through life confident and with my head held high, people question where I get off being so self-centered and want to know how I can love this life as a fat woman. I experience a daily barrage of diet advertisements, unsolicited advice on my eating habits, and suggestions from both individual strangers and businesses on ways that I can force my body to conform to societal expectations. My story is relevant, as are those of others. Looking at the life experience of fat individuals and how capitalism benefits from their exploitation is pivotal not only because the intersections of these fields are lacking, but also because, as an anarchist, it is my aim to work toward the liberation of everyone. The ever-inspiring words of bell hooks, as cited in her interview with Lowens (2011), ring through my head:

Dare to look at the intersectionalities. Dare to be holistic. Part of the heart of anarchism is, dare to go against the grain of conventional ways of thinking about our realities. Anarchists have always gone against the grain, and that’s been a place of hope (p. 7).

Capitalism and institutions operating within a capitalist framework do not make room for fat individuals and therefore, we must make our voices heard through any means necessary. The beginning of the revolutionary act is accepting yourself and allowing yourself to be the person you are. I have witnessed the capitalist, heteropatriarchy feeling threatened—made uncomfortable by my own self-acceptance. As Halberstam (2013) explained in Gaga Feminism, this is a new way of being, seeing, and interacting with society, abandoning the norms and accepting and embracing all bodies. I
won’t preach to anyone that they should love their body, because I know what it is like to have days in which your body has betrayed you, when you are in so much pain you can’t see straight. However, I refuse to be silent as capitalism turns the body, your body, my body, into a commodity. I refuse to believe that we are not whole until we buy the latest and greatest item to achieve some unattainable goal of the ideal beauty.

**Mapping my Method and Research**

Identifying as an anarchist and being a fat woman, I will say that even in practice the two do not always meet. The body positivity movement and the anarchist movement have not, as far as I can tell, joined forces. They do not necessarily see one another as allies in a common fight. While I have seen a shift toward changing attitudes in anarchist circles, it is just in the beginning stages. As anarchists we must work against the imagery of the past that has been ingrained in our culture to shame fat individuals as being greedy and equating them with “the capitalists.” Further marginalizing individuals based on their body size and using derogatory language centered on fat shaming are examples of actively taking on the role that capitalist society plays in our lives.

By placing fat people in the abnormal category of an “other,” we simply create more hierarchies that divide us from one another and create inequality. There are many instances where I have been present to hear fat jokes come from comrades. While this is hurtful to me personally, it also works as an agent to break apart the relationship of trust and group cohesion. When we accept aspects such as fat shaming from the dominant culture and do not question the ways in which our comrades are impacted by this oppression, we are leaving comrades behind and essentially saying that their fight does not matter as much as the other oppressions that we struggle against.

This work emerged and evolved from a place of darkness in which I was immersed. For nearly thirty years I have spent my time hating my body and buying into the subjective socialization that my body was wrong and that as a fat woman, I’d grown in the wrong direction. For me this has always been a place of rage in which I have to fight to claim my space, speak loudly and affirmatively to my right to take up space. It was faster for me realize the horrible realities of living in a capitalist system than it was for me to realize that I deserve respect, love, and kindness, even from myself. When I think of this
project, I often envision a map that has got me here. I have heard the lines, “You have such a pretty face, if you’d just lose some weight,” and I have broken down into tears, which led to depression and social anxiety because of literally and figuratively not fitting in. These are important markers on my map.

I’m not exactly sure when I made the decision to change the narrative in my head and actively challenge the social construction of the body ideal that surrounded me; but it feels like it started in Dr. LeSavoy’s Feminist Theory course in the spring of 2014. Putting my grievances down on paper for someone else to read added a reality to my struggle. Soon, I found myself actively seeking out fat feminist activists both locally and nationally. It is in the act of seeking my own liberation, whatever that looked like, that leads me to work toward the liberation of others. While I had self-identified as an anarchist and as queer for years before Feminist Theory, it wasn’t until then that I was able to find my own voice among fat feminists. There is great merit in telling your own story and the importance behind having your voice heard is something that is intrinsically feminist. Audre Lorde (2013) spoke the truth at top volume when she said the struggle for black women does not end when they walk away from the picket line. There is a constant struggle that is endured and that we must actively challenge, as well as respect those who on a daily basis face oppression head-on and are never able to walk away from it.

When we are not given the opportunity to speak our own truth to those in power, we must create room and claim our own space. While the revolution may not come tomorrow and the white supremacist, capitalist, hetero-patriarchy may not be destroyed in one large swoop, it is our duty as radicals and revolutionaries to welcome and embrace marginalized groups and individuals in the community. We as human beings recognize that struggle changes everything and we, as anarchists, must remember that an injury to one is an injury to all.

References


The sexualization and objectification of women in popular music videos has acted as a consistent obstacle for the feminist movement. Within a postfeminist framework -- postfeminism being a rejection of feminist ideas and a belief that the activist feminism of years past no longer serves a purpose -- music video viewers are able to see both positive advances and negative reversals. One problem often associated with the postfeminist movement is the lack of acknowledgment of race, as has historically been the case for the feminist movement, white, middle-class women are almost always the largest representation, with non-white women more often than not forgotten. The world of the popular music video is certainly no exception to this rule. Although postfeminism boasts many advances for women -- an increase in choice, a strong sense of independence and freedom, along with sexual liberties -- most of these advances are limited to white women. Despite these advances, postfeminist ideas are further limited by capitalism, consumerism, and white patriarchy, calling into question the legitimacy and efficacy of postfeminism.

The sexualization and objectification of women in popular music videos has acted as a consistent obstacle for the feminist movement. Within a postfeminist framework -- postfeminism being a rejection of feminist ideas and a belief that the activist feminism of years past no longer serves a purpose -- music video viewers are able to see both
positive advances and negative reversals. One problem often associated with the postfeminist movement is the lack of acknowledgment of race. As has historically been the case for the feminist movement, white, middle-class women are almost always the largest representation, with non-white women more often than not forgotten. The world of the popular music video is certainly no exception to this rule. Although postfeminism boasts many advances for women -- an increase in choice, a strong sense of independence and freedom, along with sexual liberties -- most of these advances are limited to white woman. In terms of popular music videos, we see these ideas portrayed through the degree of sexualization of the female artist. This research looks at the erosion of intersectionality in postfeminism with a focus on representations of women as portrayed in popular music.

Traditionally, sex sells. A woman dancing suggestively is often more appealing to the mass audience than a woman exhibiting strong, traditionally masculine traits. Women figures in the music industry -- as well as the mass media in general -- have become so sexualized that the hyper-sexualization of women is now somewhat of an epidemic. As Gill (2007) comments, "in today's media it is possession of a 'sexy body' that is presented as women's key (if not sole) source of identity" (p. 149). However, through the postfeminist movement, the media is redefining the sexualization and objectification of prominent women figures, clearly displayed through the medium of the pop music video. Rather than the sexualized woman portrayed as a victim, postfeminism argues that sexual objectification is a form of sexual liberation (Gill, 2007). However, the ways in which this sexual liberation is expressed vastly differs between the white woman and the non-white woman. As Jess Butler (2013) states: “[…] women of color are largely excluded from postfeminist discourses and representations; or, to put it another way, the idealized postfeminist subject is a white, Western, heterosexual woman” (p. 47). The representations of women within popular music videos are direct examples of this.

**A Background on Postfeminism**

So what exactly is postfeminism? The postfeminist movement, developing in the 1990s, became known as the end of feminism; the general media advertised postfeminism as proof that feminism was no longer needed. However,
postfeminism acts as a mixture of contradicting attitudes towards women's rights and popular representations of women in society. On one side, postfeminism rejects feminist ideas -- particularly those of the third wave, a post 1990s forward era known for revamping feminism with an influx of younger women developing individual feminist identities while still fighting for equality in sexual, political, and economic realms (Butler, 2013). This postfeminism claims that the active call for equality and rights no longer holds a place in the lives of feminist women (Butler, 2013). On the other side, the postfeminist woman displays a sense of independence, agency, and sexual freedom that directly resulted from feminist activism in the previous years. One theory regarding the postfeminist approach is that the feminist movement is working within the confines that society is willing to allow women agency -- women must adhere to certain ideas of femininity created by the white, heterosexual, male majority in order to be heard. As Zeisler (2008) explains in regards to the postfeminist movement, "To succeed, feminism needed to do the equivalent of going into Starbucks, buying a triple venti latte, and then passing out flyers about why other customers should boycott Starbucks" (p. 123). According to Zeisler (2008), women realized in the late 1980s and 1990s that in order to express their views and feminist ideas of independence and agency, the women of the feminist movement needed to buy into the commercialism and capitalism of contemporary society, utilizing those specific forums to provide the general American culture with a new idea of what it means to be a strong, powerful, independent woman. The paradox here, that we are post-feminist but not post-equality, falls at the center of my research.

Postfeminism is a result of the intense social change American society witnessed from the 1960s to 2000s. With the increase in agency for oppressed groups -- women, non-white members of the population, in particular -- the need "to reinforce gender and racial hierarchies and ensure that the systems of compulsory heterosexuality and white privilege remain intact" were the causeway for the antifeminist/postfeminist movement to take place (Butler, 2013, p. 46). A major example of this is the issue of sexual objectification in mass media, and, for the purpose of this paper, popular music videos. Under the postfeminist label, women in popular culture must "conform to normative
conceptions of race, class, gender and sexuality" (Springer, 2007, p. 266). Especially in regards to the divide between the white postfeminists and the non-white postfeminists, women of color are able to take part, so long as they "know their place within the racial and gender hierarchy even if they are permitted, in small numbers, to assume places in the middle class" (Springer, 2007, p. 272). Although women of color are not entirely excluded from the postfeminist movement, certain limitations and expectations are set upon them in order not to upset the power dynamic put in place by the majority -- again, the majority as white, male, and heterosexual.

It is important to note the somewhat regressive elements of postfeminist ideas, particularly regarding the intersecting identities of race and gender. The third wave of feminism in the 1970s and 1980s "was initially constructed as a more inclusive and welcoming space, particularly with regard to racial/ethnic and class diversity, than that inhabited by their first- and second-wave foremothers" (Butler, 2013, p. 42). As Butler describes, the third wave women were encouraged to develop their own individual feminist identities according to the intersectionalities of race, class, and gender, and, most importantly, these women were provided with the space to do so. Although the third wave, like postfeminism, veered away from the sex and gender equality activist agenda of the second wave, the third wave still maintained proper feminist ideals and continued to push the feminist frame of mind claiming equal rights for all. Perhaps the fact that postfeminism is almost a rejection of feminism is the reason that any representations of intersectionality present in the third wave very much dissolved under the umbrella of postfeminism.

**A Music Video Case Study**

Consider popular music artists Katy Perry and Nicki Minaj. One artist is a white woman, the other is a black woman. Both are involved in the pop music industry. Yet do both equally represent the ideas of postfeminism? For the purpose of analysis, let us consider two of their respective music videos: Katy Perry's "Roar" (Hall & Kudsi, 2013) and Nicki Minaj's "Anaconda" (Tilley, 2014). In terms of the postfeminist message portrayed through both Perry's and Minaj's music videos, one must argue that postfeminist ideals consider the white woman above all else; it is the white
woman who is allotted freedoms unavailable to others, and it is the appropriation of whiteness and white womanhood that enables women of color to express any sort of postfeminist sentiments. This argument is manifested through the lack of female sexualization in Katy Perry's “Roar” and the hyper sexualization of Nicki Minaj in “Anaconda”.

In Katy Perry's “Roar”, the viewer is presented with a man and a woman on a jungle exploration. Amidst their travels, the man is attacked and killed by a vicious tiger, and in a fit of fright, the woman (Katy Perry) flees from the scene. Throughout the rest of the music video, we watch as the woman sets into survival mode, becoming more comfortable with life in the jungle and learning how to live on her own as a strong, independent woman. She fashions together weapons for hunting, she maintains a living quarters, and soon takes command of the jungle. Through a scene in which Perry transitions from timid explorer to jungle conqueror, the idea of her newfound power and independence is displayed through a change in dress. No longer does Perry wear a conservative khaki explorer's suit; instead, she dons a jungle-woman's leopard-print low-cut top and green leafy skirt. Despite this more-revealing outfit, the woman appears more powerful than ever, even out-roaring a tiger and becoming queen of the jungle.

Nicki Minaj's “Anaconda” also portrays a dominant female figure in the jungle, yet in a far different representation. For one, Minaj--the main figure in the video--is surrounded by a nearly naked contingent of women. Minaj herself is also unclothed -- wearing all but a golden bra top and
black panty bottoms--yet Minaj clearly is the dominant figure in the story. However, Minaj's dominance is not displayed through an exhibit of strong survival skills and fighter spirit; instead, Minaj's power is shown through the objectification of herself and her fellow women. Through smacking other's rear ends and a combination of sexually suggestive dance moves, Minaj and her followers put themselves on display as hyper-sexualized beings with large backsides and voluptuous breasts. Sexual motions coupled with sexual metaphors (bananas, whipped cream) create one large mess of female sexual objectification, further reinforced by the closing lap dance Minaj gives to rap artist Drake. Although displaying a strong female character, the sexualization in Minaj's “Anaconda”, and the lack of sexualization in Perry's “Roar”, are cause for critical analysis of how accessible postfeminist ideals are to white versus black women in media representations of identity.

**Guidelines of Postfeminism**

As a lens for theoretical analysis of Minaj's “Anaconda” and Perry's “Roar”, I will be pulling from Jess Butler (2013) and Rosalind Gill's (2007, 2008) six elements of postfeminism. According to Butler (2013), a "narrative, performance, and/or text" is considered postfeminist if it contains the following elements:

1. Implies that gender equality has been achieved and feminist activism is thus no longer necessary;
2. Defines femininity as a bodily property and revives notions of natural sexual difference;
3. Marks a shift from sexual objectification to sexual subjectification;
4. Encourages self-surveillance, self-discipline, and a makeover paradigm;
5. Emphasizes individualism, choice, and empowerment as the primary routes to women's independence and freedom; and
6. Promotes consumerism and the commodification of difference (p. 44).

**Female Empowerment in Perry's “Roar”**

Let's begin with a postfeminist analysis of Katy Perry's “Roar”. Although initially Perry is shown with a male companion, the majority of the video consists of Perry as a singular, independent woman on her own. This fact alone coincides with the postfeminist idea of individualism, choice, and empowerment (Gill, 2007, 2008; Railton & Watson, 2011).
Although Perry is left alone in the jungle, rather than sitting helplessly and waiting for a man to save her, she takes her survival upon herself and learns to adapt to her new surroundings. She makes a conscious choice to learn the rules of the jungle and enforce a dominant presence over the animal predators. Through self-surveillance and self-discipline -- also components of postfeminist ideology (Gill, 2007, 2008) -- Perry asserts herself as a strong female able to live on her own in a seemingly hostile environment without fear or need for a masculine savior. The music video even incorporates the idea of the makeover paradigm; although Perry learned to survive pre-makeover, it wasn't until she showered, and took on a more jungle-style of dress, that she became truly confident in her dominance as queen of the jungle. However, it is important to note that through Perry's transformation, she took on multiple "masculine" qualities; as Railton & Watson (2011) state, "In short, to be a successful woman is to be(come) masculine" (p. 34). In order to be seen as powerful and important, women need to display qualities typically associated with men. Men in turn respond more positively and respectfully to the masculine as opposed to the feminine model.

It is interesting to note that Railton and Watson's (2011) quote is a prime example of how liberal feminism operates within postfeminism. As liberal feminism's focus is for women to achieve an equal-standing with men under enforced law, the idea that a woman needs to become like a man to be seen as equal is definitely a liberal feminist concept. However, postfeminism also calls for women to be their own person and to embrace their individuality and physical/sexual difference from men. Postfeminism, it seems, is a whole mix of contradicting feminist theories. Consider the female center of radical cultural feminism: a theory in which men and patriarchal society are labeled as the number one issue causing inequality, therefore, calling for women to dismiss the need for men altogether (Tong, 2014). If we are to look at Butler’s (2013) six elements of postfeminism, many of the ideas are radical in theory, encouraging women to have choice and independence in what postfeminists consider to be an already gender-equal society. However, in order to achieve and remain within this postfeminist world, women must operate under the institutionalized guidelines enforced by the white, capitalist, consumerist patriarchy. In much the same way that
postfeminists must continue to breed traditional feminist ideas, such ideas, although radical, must operate in a liberal feminist method of action.

Probably the most important display of postfeminism in Katy Perry's “Roar” is the shift from objectification of women to the subjectification of women. Throughout the entire music video, there is little to no sexual suggestion or sexual representation. Contrary to the popular representations of women in the media, Perry's video takes a chance and ignores the appeal of sexuality in the hopes that a strong, powerful woman is just as sellable as a sexy, vulnerable female. This is an interesting move, considering that common postfeminist belief hails the portrayals of sexually free women (Butler, 2013; Gill, 2007, 2008; Railton & Watson, 2011). Not once does Perry use sex within the video to portray any sort of message; the closest representation of sexuality is the shower scene in which Perry is shown naked from the shoulders up, running her hands over the surface of her head while an elephant friend uses its trunk as a shower head. A valid representation, yes, however, the scene is incredibly short and reveals no body parts other than head, arms, and shoulders -- a stark contrast to the usual focus on "breasts, bottoms, and flowing hair" (Gill, 2008, p. 438). Additionally, one could argue that the makeover of Perry in the music video has her switch from a more conservative fashion style to a sexier, more suggestive style. Although this is somewhat true -- Perry takes on a sort of "Jane of the Jungle" look -- Perry executes no movement that sexualizes her in this more revealing outfit. In fact, Perry becomes a more powerful figure in conjunction with her new style of dress. Through a postfeminist lens, Perry is merely exercising her freedom to sexuality through her semi-revealing yet also practical outfit. She does not flaunt her feminine sexuality for the pleasure of others; rather, she acknowledges her own sexuality, and, considering Butler's (2013) discussion of Foucault's (1978) definition of sexuality "as a socially constructed instrument of power," Perry quite clearly uses it to her own free will (p. 37). Yet, once again, the concept of "her own free will" must be questioned. Working within the limitations of a capitalist and consumerist society governed by patriarchy -- elements accepted in a postfeminist discourse -- very likely denies Perry full artistic and feminist expression.
Minaj and Sexual Liberation...Or Objectification

Nicki Minaj’s “Anaconda” alternatively portrays postfeminist ideology in a much different light. First and foremost, Minaj's video is a perfect example of the hyper-sexualization of women, women of color, in particular. The video begins with a shot of Minaj bookended by two women, their large rear ends facing the camera and shaking in slow motion. Such events occur throughout the entirety of the video; constant fragmentation of the female body, constant close-ups of sexual body parts, and constant use of the woman's body as prop rather than a significant, independent figure. If a woman wishes to be sexual, then postfeminism celebrates that wish. However, if a woman is sexually suggestive through her own objectification of other women, one must really question the motives of such an idea; playing another woman's buttocks as if they were bongo drums is not a common display of feminist ideology. Additionally, sexually suggestive dance moves such as the spreading of the legs, twirling and gyrating of the pelvis, as well as a fairly straightforward lap-dance, contributes to the sexualization of Minaj and others in the “Anaconda” video.

Despite the prominent sexualization and sexual imagery throughout Minaj’s video, a few postfeminist ideas are indeed incorporated. For one, there is a sense of choice and empowerment -- Minaj appears to make an informed choice to be sexual and asserts her power as leader of the pack. In much the same sense of Perry in “Roar”, Minaj is the queen of the jungle. However, the medium through which this dominance is represented is what should be questioned. In “Roar” we watch as Perry fashions weapons and fights tigers. In “Anaconda”, we see Minaj smack other women's rear ends and smear whipped cream all over her chest as sexual innuendo. Quite obviously, Minaj's portrayal of power and dominance may be considered as catering towards the male desire -- for what other purpose would Minaj smear whipped cream suggestively all over her chest other than the wish to appeal to a male audience? This relates back to Van Erp's (2013) idea that "Artists who appear to be postfeminist, whether that is through imagery or song lyrics, might place themselves in an inferior position to men -- even unconsciously" (p. 13). Despite the questionable sexualization of Minaj, the video does clearly reinforce the idea of femininity as a bodily property; Minaj and company
know how to use their bodies to achieve the highest form of femininity that they can, a form which unfortunately adapts into hypersexualization. This is a perfect example of how "on one hand women are presented as active, desiring social subjects, yet on the other they are subject to a level of scrutiny and hostile surveillance that has no historical precedent" (Gill, 2007, p. 163).

Interestingly, Minaj has often commented on her desire to live for herself and not for the pleasure of men. As quoted in an interview with Nightline's Juju Chang, Minaj said, "I'm always tellin 'my Barbz [her fan base],' Always be successful outside of a man" (Butler, 2013, p. 36). Perhaps Minaj is merely choosing to resist the typical conceptions of what it means to be a woman in society. Yet, as Gill (2007) states, explained by Railton and Watson (2011), "independent women are often 'endowed with agency' only in so far as 'they can actively choose to objectify themselves" (p. 29). This thought circles back to how the ideas of postfeminism must adhere to certain limitations within a capitalist, consumerist, patriarchal society. Even though postfeminism claims that an active feminist movement is no longer required, stating that women and men have achieved equality, women within a postfeminist ideology are still only pawns in the world owned by men. So, as Gill (2007, 2008) is saying, these women appear to have freedoms and sexual liberties, yet in reality, the men are actively guiding how these freedoms come about. In other words, the freedoms women are able to express -- especially in the media -- are all executed in a way that continues to cater to the male gaze.

One prominent ideology that must be considered when analyzing Minaj's "Anaconda" is the idea of irony and knowingness. At the very end of the video, the camera cuts to a room in which rap artist Drake sits in a chair and stares as Minaj crawls suggestively towards him, eventually providing him with a lap dance, only to leave as soon as Drake touches her. Through this scene, Minaj seems to be telling the audience that she knows about the male desire for a hyper-sexualized woman, yet she's not willing to be entirely submissive to the male. She's willing to give him a sexualized experience, yet she is still in control. However, while arguably a postfeminist message, Minaj also seems to deny any previous claims that her sexualization is for her own pleasure. This scene with Drake appears to tap into the ever-present concept of
voyeurism in music videos that Fei (2014) so ardently criticizes. Not only that, but Minaj's contradiction of herself could be seen as a direct example of women needing to adhere to certain societal expectations and constraints -- especially in the realms of consumerism and capitalism -- in order to be recognized, heard, and seen. In Minaj's case, although she has a tendency to avoid staying "in any one representational box for long," and clearly expresses a desire to be her own woman, to "sell records 'like dudes,'" and to freely express her sexuality, the social expectation for her as a black woman is to only go so far outside that she still retains the essence of white, patriarchal culture (Butler, 2013, p. 52).

The Black Woman and Appropriation of Whiteness

The most important question when analyzing Perry's "Roar" and Minaj's "Anaconda" is the question of how race affects the postfeminist messages that the artists display. Butler (2013) argues that postfeminism is made for the white woman and ignores the non-white woman. Borrowing Butler's (2013) thinking, does Katy Perry's jungle video display more feminist ideals than Nicki Minaj's? Although all women have traditionally been sexualized through the mass media, it is most definitely the non-white woman -- in this case the black woman -- who receives the brunt of the male gaze. Throughout the postfeminist movement, white women have successfully moved away from total objectification, receiving opportunities to present themselves in a strong, empowering, non-sexual way. However, black women have been far less fortunate, feeling pressured to objectify themselves in ways extremely demeaning to their sense of self. As Durham (2012) explains, the music video has been accountable for creating popular black representations, yet black women more so than white women struggle to meet a double-standard in the expectations of such representations. Ideas such as the "simultaneous respectable and sexually accessible womanhood," fantasies of the "hip hop booty," and sexual expression that is required yet also criticized by society are much of the cause for disparities between postfeminist ideas as exhibited by white and black women in music (Durham, 2012, p. 37, 41, 44-45).

Katy Perry's "Roar" and Nicki Minaj's "Anaconda" display different degrees of sexualization and objectification of women figures, yet it is important to recognize that society continues to
require a certain level of sexuality exhibited by all women in the media. As Rosalind Gill (2008) states:

…that a particular kind of beauty and sexiness has become a prerequisite for subjection itself...we may now have to add compulsory (sexual) agency, as a required feature of contemporary postfeminist, neoliberal subjectivity. This is much more than a remoulding of the body; it is nothing short of a remaking of subjectivity (p. 440).

Although both Perry’s and Minaj’s respective music videos are arguably examples of postfeminism -- each represents personal choice and sexual freedom, among other ideas -- we must consider the fact that postfeminism is about contradiction. As Butler (2013) explains, postfeminism "simultaneously rejects feminist activism in favor of feminine consumption and celebrates the success of feminism while declaring its irrelevance" (p. 44). Both white and black women in the media continue to be limited in their representations by society. However, the point of contention is the continued portrayal of black women as objects and less-than human compared to the portrayal of white women as strong individuals. Both Perry and Minaj are pressured to conform to societal ideals of womanhood. Yet, the hyper-sexualization, fragmentation, and objectification of the women in “Anaconda”, and the lack of sexual objectification of women in “Roar” reinforce the idea that society is much more comfortable allowing white women as opposed to non-white women exhibit the ideas of postfeminism.

While both white and non-white women continue to be confined to certain traditional ideas of womanhood and gender roles that are accepted within white, patriarchal, capitalist society, non-white women must work extra hard to make themselves visible -- often times, this means the appropriation of white culture. Although Minaj is an interesting character herself, known for appropriating various cultural identities (i.e. Harajuku, Barbie, even a male alter-ego named Roman Zolanski), one must question the reasoning behind her various personalities. Theorizing the absence of intersectional consideration in postfeminism, it is plausible to argue that Minaj feels the need to portray identities that are the opposite of her actual self in order to be seen and heard within popular culture. As Tracy Owens Patton (2006) explains in regards to the struggles of the African American woman, "The desire to change her
outer appearance to meet a Eurocentric ideal may lead her to loathe her own physical appearance and believe that 'Black is not beautiful...that she can only be lovely by impersonating someone else'" (p.114). Although not every character of Minaj's is a traditional white woman, one could argue that each character Minaj creates -- a Japanese character/fashion line promoted by the white Gwen Stefani, a most traditional figurine portraying white womanhood, a man -- appears to be allotted more agency and self-expression within society than an average black American woman.

**Capitalism -- The Feminist's Enemy**

If postfeminism truly marks a point at which feminism is no longer necessary, than why do oppressive ideas that the previous feminist movements fought against still exist, and most ardently, among the marginalized lives of non-white women? Clearly, postfeminism has not been an all-encompassing movement, and even clearer still, has not been as progressively pro-woman and pro-women's rights as the feminist movements preceding it -- especially when considering how tightly capitalism and consumerism have bound women in the media. Through a postfeminist lens, we can argue that Katy Perry and Nicki Minaj are independent female artists who are free to express their own opinions and personalities in popular culture. However, Perry and Minaj remain products of the capitalist, consumerist, patriarchal society in which we live. Even if Perry and Minaj wish to send certain messages to their fans, the end result always relies upon the concept that will sell.

In “Roar”, Perry and her male companion are camping out in the jungle with hoards of material goods; Perry's camp is a disruption of the natural jungle ecosystem. As the video progresses, Perry dismisses her material goods, becoming more natural and more compatible with the jungle, yet all of this disappears when Perry wakes up in her materialistic jungle-camp at the very end of the video. After honing her survival skills, fighting a tiger, and learning how to live with the animals, Perry returns to the man-made, material world -- symbolic of the boundaries of capitalist, consumerist, patriarchal society.

For Minaj's “Anaconda”, the capitalist and consumerist presence is deeply rooted in the music video. Most specifically, the product placement throughout the video is blatant and unapologetic. Brodesser-Akner (2014) of *Gentlemen's Quarterly* (GQ) observes...
that "In the ‘Anaconda’ video, there are no fewer than five products placed prominently for advertising: her Beats by Dre speakers imprint and her Moscato but also a Victoria’s Secret bra, some Air Jordans, and a baffling ‘teatox’ drink called MateFit (dialysis machine sold separately)” (p.1). The capitalism and consumerism runs so deep in the entertainment industry, that, as Minaj says in the GQ interview, she has a management team member whose "main focus is to go out there and find new brands for me to do business with or to find brands that would like to be in our videos and contribute to our budget" (Brodesser-Akner, 2014, p. 1). Essentially, any messages Minaj or Perry may wish to portray in their music videos -- be them feminist related or not -- capitalist and consumerist symbols will always interject a constant presence.

When considering Katy Perry's “Roar” and Nicki Minaj's “Anaconda”, each music video contains possible images that may be considered postfeminist. Both artists are shown in their respective videos as independent, strong women who can think for themselves and find liberation, both sexual and otherwise. Yet the presence of capitalist and consumerist symbols, as well as an obvious catering towards the white, heterosexual, male majority, destroys any feminist messages that may be involved. As products of a capitalist, patriarchal society, Perry and Minaj are unable to fully express pro-women and pro-women's rights sentiments, bringing in to question whether or not anyone in the media -- women in particular -- can be represented as fully feminist. Although Perry receives many more freedoms as a white woman compared to Minaj as a black woman, as integers of a capitalist and patriarchal society, any feminist messages Perry and Minaj identify with and wish to express are undermined by the white, heterosexual, male majority that runs the capitalist and consumerist world.

References


**Videos:**
- YouTube link to Katy Perry's *Roar* (Hall & Kudsi, 2013).
- YouTube link to Nicki Minaj's *Anaconda* (Tilly, 2014).
The (de)Evolution of the Disney Princess

The Disney Princess franchise does a remarkable job of asking girls to picture themselves as princesses, reinforcing the question: What else would a little girl want to be? The reality of this Disney fantasy is one of gendering young girls to embody a social construction of hyper-femininity through misguided film representations and princess play toys. This research looks at media influences on girlhood through a close reading of the Disney princess. I argue that Disney has focused less and less on the genuine qualities and faithful morality of their princesses, and instead, on the prince-princess dichotomy of finding true love.

“…and the prince and princess lived happily ever after.” Or, so children are trained to think as they watch the lives of beautiful cartoon people. The beloved stories about handsome rescuers, finding true love, and marrying off in the most beautiful wedding dress ever seen, is a common escape for many children, especially little girls. Fortunately, for the population of little women decked out in pink sparkles, red lipstick, and glittering wands, Disney has provided the greatest gift of all; not just a film series, but an entire franchise designed to capture every girl’s inner-princess. How fitting—literally—plastic heels and faux-satin dresses emblazoned with the face of that favorite princess, designed just for you! The Disney Princess franchise does a remarkable job of asking girls to picture themselves as princesses, reinforcing the question: What
else would a little girl want to be? The reality of this Disney fantasy is one of gendering young girls to embody a social construction of hyper-femininity through misguided film representations and princess play toys. This research looks at media influences on girlhood through a close reading of the Disney princess. I argue that Disney has focused less and less on the genuine qualities and faithful morality of their princesses, and instead, on the prince-princess dichotomy of finding true love. Society as a whole declares that children can become the things they wish to be if they have a role model; someone to aspire to that proves to children that hard work, a strong moral ground, and a positive outlook on life can get you far. Yet, when children see images of girls and women that are inconsistent with this aspirational model, adults claim that children cannot and will not understand. Are those not contradictory statements? This research on the Disney Princesses will highlight that children, especially young girls, are affected by the lack of strong, independent female leaders. Compared to other characters in a Disney Princess film, the princess is typically the weakest, most dependent, and genderized character in the film (Clark, 2002). How, then, does this create a character that provides a decent role model for young girls? How does this illustrate that Disney puts emphasis on the aspirational qualities of a princess? The fact of the matter is, Disney falls short and focuses much more on perpetuating consumerism and gender stereotypes than delivering a happy, healthy, self-efficient girl role model.

When looking at children’s media—both in literature and films—there is a lot of quantitative research done about the roles, body types, and actions of men and women characters. There is little research done in the qualitative nature—looking at how and why their body types are so stereotyped and “standard” (in the sense that they are all the same and reflect common beauty ideals), why their actions are so gendered, and if and how the roles of men and women in children’s media are playing into gender stereotypes. Qualitative research gives reason and understanding into the social constructions that create these gendered expectations. In my studies at The College at Brockport, I have become involved with the Women and Gender Studies Program, as well as the Interdisciplinary Arts for Children Department. The combination of these two studies has brought me to an
intersection where I want to focus on gender issues within our modern day society, but especially hone my skills towards the affects these issues have on children and where children become exposed to these issues. Social grooming comes in all shapes and sizes, but my focus on children’s media has directly led me into the princess population. *Frozen* (2013), the most recent princess film Disney has flooded the market with, has been noted as the “most progressive” princess film for a number of reasons, but especially because of its “strong independent princesses.” On the contrary, these princesses have done no more (or are even less independent and adventurous) than most of the other princesses in Disney’s line up. These gender roles touch on everything from the hyper-feminine and clearly stereotypical body shape of a princess—which is a terribly important topic in the study of young girls—to a princess’s goal of finding true love.

**Sex and Gender**

Sex and gender are highly complicated topics. Unless you are in the midst of gender studies, there is a good chance that you don’t quite know what’s what. That is not uncommon; however, it proves that our society is highly problematic. Judith Butler (2005), a well-known feminist author and lecturer, states:

In other words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance but produce this *on the surface* of the body, though the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that is has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality (p. 500).

With this statement, Butler argues that gender is not only a performance by an individual, but it is also performative, meaning that people mimic the dominating societal ideals about gender and create a set of behaviors. These behaviors are, in American society and especially in media portrayals, strictly categorized into masculinity and femininity. This is the gender binary. Sex, on the other hand, is determined by the body, and “preexists the acquisition of its sexed significance” (p. 496). With this statement, Butler makes...
it clear that gender and sex remain separate. Society, to enforce the gender binary, dictates that sex and gender should match up; that if you are a man you must be masculine, and if you are a woman, you must be feminine. Consider the cartooned depiction of the “Genderbread Person” in Figure 1. This cartoon character simplistically, yet efficiently, outlines the differences that media typically takes for granted. It shows that sex is the biological aspect—what your anatomy looks like. Gender, on the other hand, comes into play when describing how people perform and how that performance is repeated. Perhaps if mainstream media, like Disney, would incorporate the illustration into their own characters, they would be less likely to swing to gender binary extremes.

The gender binary also is a concept that is so engrained in our society that you might not even notice there is something fundamentally wrong with it. Indeed, the gender binary is the socially accepted rules and regulations of how masculinity and femininity are presented (Butler, 2005).

Unfortunately, anything and everything in between these opposites is discouraged; in fact, societal standards typically do not even address that men and women could be anything in

![The Genderbread Person v2.0](image)

Figure 1. The Genderbread Person v2.0 (Killermann, 2015).
between. This creates a sort of polarization of the terms masculinity and femininity, so that the images that we see on a day-to-day basis, especially in media productions, are extremes.

**Media Literacy**
The cultivation theory analyzed in “Gender Role Portrayal and the Disney Princesses” states

…exposure to television content helps develop concepts regarding social behavior and norms…higher levels of exposure to gendered messages are likely associated with stronger effects on children’s gender socialization (England, 2011, p. 557).

This theory highlights the importance of socialization of children through media, and the simple fact that if media creates a gender stereotyped space, children will take those messages away from whatever they are watching. Further, the process of encoding and decoding examined in *Gender & Popular Culture* by Milestone & Meyer (2011) allows for power in both the hands of the media and the audience. Milestone & Meyer (2011) state:

…the media as producers have the power to encode a text with particular meanings and messages. The meaning which they intend the audience to get is called the preferred meaning. When audiences read media texts, they engage in an active process of decoding meanings and messages. (p. 156-157)

Granted, while young children aren’t as educated or well versed on the efforts of the media to persuade its consumers, they still definitely pick up on the messages through strategies employed by the media. Disney, for example, usually focuses its main messages on some sort of moral issue. Therefore, morality is Disney’s preferred message. However, Disney does, through emphasizing morality, give power to who should be the one to perform on moral ground. Typically, morality is granted to both the prince and princess; they do what they can to be together in the end, and defeat whatever the evil temptress represents. The ways in which the prince and princess stand their moral grounds, however, are different, and Disney slides this message of who-should-perform-how in subtle yet powerful ways.

In my own personal life, Disney has played a large role. The Disney Princess movies were near and dear to my heart all throughout my childhood. I watched them all, and as I grew older, I re-watched them with my own little sister, Cassidy. As Cassidy recently approached her twelfth birthday, I could not help but notice her constant
policing of self. She babbled on about what she had accomplished in her latest dance class; how far she could bend and how much she had sweat. In the same token, she discussed how she needed to go on a diet to keep her figure in check and what types of clothes suited her body type the best. It’s true, my sister is quite the “girly girl,” but I never realized that an extension of her ideals also could be making sure that she fits well into the sphere of the real girl. This is exactly what concerned and prompted me to focus on the effects of children’s media on consumers. I can acknowledge that Disney alone is not to blame for my sister looking at her own waist in a negative light, but Disney films certainly have influence over her and millions of other girls worldwide. Disney Princesses manipulate their audiences into thinking that true femininity is exactly what they portray, and if Cassidy cannot fit that mold, then is she failing as a girl? Will she fail to be a successful woman? If girls are taking life lessons from their favorite Disney Princess, then yes, they might be apt to fail.

**Development of our Princesses**

Girls have indeed changed over the years and in a way that promotes the same type of thinking that consumed my sister (and, if we’re speaking quite frankly, me too). Brumberg (1997), in her book entitled *The Body Project*, states that “The emphasis on “good works” as opposed to “good looks” meant that the lives of young women in the nineteenth century had a very different orientation from those of girls today” (p. ix). This observation has been noted from comparing the diaries of American girls in the late nineteenth century to those of girls growing up in the late twentieth century. Instead of wanting to improve upon their diligence, work ethic, social skills, and learning, girls today are much more focused on pleasing themselves and others through their physical appearance. Brumberg refers back to the girl of the twentieth century, quoting, “I will try to make myself better in any way I possibly can...I will lose weight, get new lenses, already got new haircut, good makeup, new clothes and accessories” (p. xxi). Society has pushed girls and young women further away from the importance of their actions and towards the policing of their bodies. While girls and young women (and society) claim that they have greater liberation in today’s day and age, it seems as though they are actually halted by simply appearing as if they are liberated.
Indeed, girls’ bodies seem to have become “a primary expression of their individual identity” (Brumberg, 1997, p. xxi). But why have girls become so preoccupied with their bodies? True, girls have been physically maturing at younger and younger ages, which to some can create an issue of having a body that one simply does not know what to do with. On top of having a well-developed body at a younger age, girls are constantly being barraged with media that tells them how to treat their bodies, as well as how their bodies are supposed to look. Disney is no exception; the bodies of their princesses are strictly maintained, upgraded, and refurbished.

What is a Disney Princess, exactly? Currently, there are eleven members of the line-up (I will be focusing on thirteen princesses), which includes Snow White, Cinderella, Aurora (also known as Briar Rose in Sleeping Beauty), Ariel, (from The Little Mermaid) Belle (from Beauty and the Beast), Jasmine (from Aladdin), Pocahontas, Mulan, Tiana (from Princess and the Frog), Rapunzel (from Tangled), and Merida (from Brave). Each of these princesses has been through a “coronation” ceremony that allowed their induction into what Disney refers to the official princess line-up (“Disney Princess,” 2015). The latest Disney movie, Frozen, has two princesses, Anna and Elsa, a princess who actually becomes the queen of their kingdom. Disney has announced that both characters are to be inducted into the line-up later in 2015, so for all intensive purposes, I include and analyze them with the rest of the princesses. The Disney Princesses are set apart based on their specific franchise created by Andy Mooney in 2000. According to Mooney, the definition of a princess is “so broadly constructed that it actually has no meaning” (cited in Orenstein, 2012, p. 14).

Look like a Princess

Truth be told, the Disney Princesses all have a great number of things in common: their stories are mostly similar in their bare-bones structure, and they embody loyalty, kindness, courageousness, and so on and so forth. Perhaps the most peculiar (and most problematic) similarity within the Disney Princess line up is their physical attributes. Indeed, all of our Disney Princesses look the same. After their redesign in 2013, there is an even greater striking similarity between them all, even Disney’s “cultural” princesses. Figure 2 illustrates the differences...
between the princesses before and after the redesign.

Common factors among all of the princesses include a much more feminized look. There are: more pink, more glitter, more curves, and more skin. Their body types have certainly altered—look at the waists on the characters—even arm, neck, and hand size have been altered to create a slender, young, and small figure. Over the years, most of the princesses have lighter skin tones, even princesses of color. Their features, including bigger eyes, widened faces, smaller noses, and completely changed shapes of their heads and faces, have been “Europeanized.” All of the princesses

Figure 2. Disney Princess, before and after 2013 redesign (“Disney princesses,” 2015)
have also been sexualized—look at their body positioning, especially their hip-to-hand location and the face tilt (Cohen, 2015). Longer, luscious hair has been added to multiple characters, which furthers the idealization of sex appeal. Even their red lips are a factor in this heightened sex appeal—red lips have been known to symbolize strength and independence in a woman; however, the bright red color also symbolizes sexual availability and sex appeal. Historically, prostitutes and actresses were the only women who wore red lipstick, especially in Europe (where most of these stories originated). Together, they seem less like a group of strong and independent women, and more like glossed over figurines of femininity. There isn’t even a sort of solidarity between the princesses, which is actually supposed to be there in storyline (Ebrahim, 2014). Andy Mooney stated that he formed the picture of the princess so that "Each stares off in a slightly different direction as if unaware of the others' presence" (cited in Orenstein, 2012, p. 15). This apparent devolution of the princesses is unmistakably sexist.

Act like a Princess

All of the Disney Princesses (except Elsa) have been nominated heroines because of their actions in the films. But what exactly makes them heroines? They show morality, and they are sometimes super brave, but their actions are diminished with the arrival of their savior-like princes. Some princesses don’t really do anything—Sleeping Beauty? Sleeps. Snow White? Sleeps. Anna and Elsa? Well, Elsa freezes her kingdom and almost kills her sister while Anna abandons her kingdom (leaving it in the hands of, yes, her betrothed, who she had just met that day) to convince her sister to return to the kingdom, which she fails at doing. Most of the Disney Princesses do have real hopes and dreams, and Disney makes sure that all of the princesses declare these hopes and dreams—essentially, what they strive for throughout their stories and always achieve at the end—in a sing-along. However, instead of singing about solid, self-improving goals, the first ever Disney Princess, Snow White, and the latest princess, Anna, both sing about wanting to find “the one.” In “I’m Wishing,” Snow White sings

I'm wishing
(I'm wishing)
For the one I love
To find me
(to find me)
Today

Act like a Princess

All of the Disney Princesses (except Elsa) have been nominated heroines because of their actions in the films. But what exactly makes them heroines? They show morality, and they are sometimes super brave, but their actions are diminished with the arrival of their savior-like princes. Some princesses don’t really do anything—Sleeping Beauty? Sleeps. Snow White? Sleeps. Anna and Elsa? Well, Elsa freezes her kingdom and almost kills her sister while Anna abandons her kingdom (leaving it in the hands of, yes, her betrothed, who she had just met that day) to convince her sister to return to the kingdom, which she fails at doing. Most of the Disney Princesses do have real hopes and dreams, and Disney makes sure that all of the princesses declare these hopes and dreams—essentially, what they strive for throughout their stories and always achieve at the end—in a sing-along. However, instead of singing about solid, self-improving goals, the first ever Disney Princess, Snow White, and the latest princess, Anna, both sing about wanting to find “the one.” In “I’m Wishing,” Snow White sings

I'm wishing
(I'm wishing)
For the one I love
To find me
(to find me)
Today
Disney Princesses have, in some cases, become more goal-oriented, but the very first and very last princesses have not displayed determination, practicality, or anything outside of romance in their “goal song.” Merida is the only Disney Princess who does not have a goals song in her movie, but she does technically sing throughout the entire movie—her voice actress sings “Touch the Sky” and states:

Lead me out into the light…
I will ride, I will fly,
Chase the wind and touch the sky,
I will fly…I will hear their every story,
Take hold of my own dream,
Be as strong as the seas are stormy,
And proud as an eagle’s scream

These lyrics are definitely her own voice, declaring what she intends to do. First, Disney has Snow White sing of her longing for a lover. In the middle of the line-up, other princesses sing about things besides men—including Mulan’s “Reflection” where she states:

On that day, I'll discover someway to be myself,
and to make my family proud.
They want a docile lamb,
No-one knows who I am.
Must there be a secret me,
I'm forced to hide?
Must I pretend that I am someone else for all the time?

Mulan is singing about how she cannot be the figure of femininity that everyone expects, and that she wants her family to see her for whom she truly is. At the end of the film, we certainly see that she has achieved that goal, with the help of her “prince” (Whelan, 2012).

Other princesses, who are not so well known for being so active in their stories, also have strong goal songs—like “Belle”, who sings, “There must be more than this provincial life!” She wants to escape her small town in France and make the adventures in all of the books she has been reading her reality. At the end of the movie, the Beast (her prince) has provided her with an expansive library and the means to do whatever she wants with her life.

Unfortunately, Disney did not stay on the track of characterizing strong and reasonable goals for princesses that did not revolve around men. If Disney were really on the road to a more progressive storyline, you would think they would have a great, intense, roaring, and meaningful song for Ana, right? Wrong. In fact, her goal song is
entitled, “For the First Time in Forever,” and she sings:

I suddenly see him standing there,
A beautiful stranger, tall and fair…
For the first time in forever
I could be noticed by someone
And I know it is totally crazy
to dream I’d find romance
But for the first time in forever
At least I’ve got a chance

This song is about the opening up of her kingdom and how happy she’ll be to break her lonely life, but then, it turns into a song about finding “the one.” She’s gone from happiness created from friendships and an open community to finding her sudden and heteronormal man lover.

Once a princess sings her goal song, there is almost always (the one exception being Brave in 2012) a prince that helps her to reach her goals; without him, she would not have accomplished what she intended to do. This is especially true for the princesses whose true focus is finding her true love. There is certainly nothing wrong with asking for help, or receiving it, but it becomes problematic when Disney suggests that a princess cannot accomplish her goals if she lacks the help of a prince. This, Disney claims, is her fate. Fate also is mentioned in nearly every Disney Princess movie, and it determines where the princess will go on her journey (Whelan, 2012). The message that Disney sends to young girls with the concept of fate is essentially that they can never escape their fate, no matter how hard they try. The extremely gendered nature of the princess movies creates an even bigger issue; it tells young children (boys and girls alike) that they have to stay in their assigned role because that is what the world has set up. This is not actually the case when in the real world, but in their princess line-up, Disney completely dismisses gender fluidity, and instead, pushes gender inequality to an extreme that is based in consumerism.

“Supporting” Characters

The Disney Princesses have also quite obviously been known for their counterparts, the handsome princes. These princes are not always princes, just like the princesses are not always princesses; however, they are always there, side-by-side with the princess -- or, like in the case of Sleeping Beauty (1959), -- by themselves, facing the dangerous journey with strong hands and a winning smile. Similar to the princesses, the body types of Disney men are stereotyped to the extreme.
Men in Disney Princess films are hyper-masculinized and look the exact opposite of the princess. Typically, the prince staggers above the princess at a much taller height, holds himself upright, and has wide, angular shoulders and arms and a strong jawline. Essentially, the Disney prince is there to take up space. In almost any picture portrayal of a Disney prince and princess, the prince is pictured standing over and usually holding, or in close proximity to, the princess. He is placed there to shelter and protect her. But how can Disney claim that their princesses are strong, independent women if they have to be literally guarded by a man? Even in depictions of Ana and Kristoff (her love interest) in Frozen (2013), they are standing so that she is turned in towards him, while he looks confidently outwards, taking up at least twice the amount of the frame than she does.

Perhaps the most frustrating difference is the size of Kristoff’s hand when holding the princesses. In nearly every Disney Princess films, and especially in the later of the films, when a princess takes the hand of any man, there is such a great difference that it looks like the hand of a child in the hand of a full-grown man. This difference furthers the prince’s ability to be physical, because he has hands (and feet) that are proportionate enough to his body so that he can actually do activities. Granted, people do have all sorts of body shapes and types, but if every single woman looked like a Disney Princess, they wouldn’t be able to play sports or do normal activities because of their frail, feeble bodies. Likewise, if all men looked like a Disney man (especially one in the prince category), they would really only be comfortable doing manual labor or professional wrestling because of their huge bodies.

While all of these issues are clearly problematic, there is one more piece of the prince-princess dichotomy that
Disney has kept up with throughout almost all of their films: finding true love in the first man you meet. The relationships between the princes and princesses are based on a short length of time; in fact, sometimes they spend literally no time together before they supposedly fall in love. This formula is apparent in every Disney Princess film besides *Brave* (2012), which is a highly unusual princess movie anyway, because of Merida’s lack of love for a man and her determination for her own agency, which really go hand in hand. In *Frozen* (2013), Ana is smitten with Hans, a prince from another land, and she gets engaged to him a mere few hours after meeting him. While the other characters do find fault in her engagement (and it is eventually broken off), it shows just how focused she was on finding a prince. Towards the end of the story, she presumably dates the other male suitor who ventured alongside her. This still places her focus on affection from a man, and still a man who she does not know that well, although there is a slight compromise in not writing in another betrothal.

While the morals that Disney focuses on for their princesses are great, it’s not the message that really pulls children into the stories. In fact, the reason so many little girls play princess is not so that their friends will be nice to them; it is so that they can gather positive attention from their peers and adults for looking beautiful and taking on hyper-feminine characteristics, including being a good host, being patient and waiting their turn to speak and talk, and wishing for “the perfect man” (Wohlwend, 2009).

Villains, on the other hand, are typically much more flexible characters than the princesses (or even the princes) of Disney stories. Villains have a lot of terrible qualities, including vanity, greed, and ruthlessness, but they also possess a lot of great qualities, including determination, worldly smarts, and aggressiveness. This aggressiveness could be seen as a bad thing, but the way Disney shows this aggressiveness, it is usually perceived more as a persistence of fortitude rather than hurtful aggression. The villains may have greater goals and are much more focused and driven. While villains sometimes have henchmen, they predominantly rely on themselves to get the job done. Overall, villains are much stronger, more independent characters than any of the Disney Princesses have been thus far.
The villains in the Disney Princess films certainly do play into gendered stereotypes, but beauty is typically not their main focus, and if it is, its emphasis is on the princess’s beauty. For example, the Evil Queen’s goal is to be the most beautiful in all the land, and therefore, Snow White’s beauty is also accentuated within the story. Likewise, in *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), Gaston is extremely vain, and only wants to make Belle his wife because she is more beautiful than any other woman in their village. Male villains, like Gaston, are usually competing male suitors, who typically use force to try to get the princess to love them. When this happens, the princess might stand up for herself once or twice, but it takes the help of the prince (or man friend) to get rid of the evil villain. This does not teach girls to stand up and fight for themselves; rather, to run away and find another man to fight their battles for them. Only Merida, from *Brave* (2012), fights off unwanted men without the help of a current lover, but she also does not approach her unwanted lovers directly. The men competing for her hand are also not necessarily the villains in the story -- in fact -- one could argue that her parents are the true villains. It is true, Disney plays on a sort of poor parenting stereotype that is present in almost every Princess film, especially related to the mother-daughter rift that is supposed to occur when girls are teenagers (all the princesses are fourteen to nineteen years of age).

This leads into another rather problematic part of Disney’s villain complex: who is the true villain? In *Frozen* (2013), Elsa and Ana’s parents essentially tell Elsa that she is a danger to other people. Are they the true villains? There is also Hans, who plans to steal the kingdom for himself after killing Anna and Elsa. He is the one character that is supposedly the villain of the story—but then again, there is also Elsa—who freezes her kingdom, abandons it, and then almost kills her sister. Elsa is being inducted into the Disney Princess line, but she does not seem to fit the mold of the Disney Princess beyond her looks and being born into a royal line within the story’s plot, a variable that, technically, is not a requirement for being a princess. If Disney really were trying to give girls a valid and respectable princess without putting emphasis on a princess’s outward appearance, perhaps Elsa would have had more character development, or even a redeeming quality that did not surround her eventually (and reluctantly) saving her sister.
Dealing with Disney

There are hundreds of blogs, news articles, forums for parents, teens, and children alike that are all raging out because Disney hasn’t provided a strong enough female character in the Disney Princess line. While the page has now been debunked, there used to be a feminist blogger who created a “This is What a Disney Princess Should Look Like” campaign, where girls and women of all different ethnicities, ages, sizes, and interests sent in their pictures, proving that none of them were quite alike and neither should be any of the princesses. The 2013 redesigns of the Disney Princess line-up does not encapsulate the true messages that Disney is supposedly trying to send to young girls, but rather, reinforces infantilization and sexualization of young girls in the media, supposedly made to “modernize” the characters. If modernization is equivalent to furthering gender stereotypes and gender equality, perhaps society should turn to look at itself. The consumerism that Disney is really trying to feed is letting go of any progress that has been made within regards to a more fluid and equal view of gender, and creating a system that benefits from stifling the prospect of solid role models for young girls (and young boys too). The Disney Princess has not evolved into a true and morally upstanding role model for young girls. Even England (2011) states in “Gender Role Portrayal and the Disney Princesses” that:

The gendered messages did not consistently move away from traditional themes in more recent movies. Whereas some movies showed a number of non-stereotypical gender qualities, all of the movies incorporated some stereotypical representations of gender (p. 564).

As gender equality becomes more and more acknowledged in greater American society, the media that influences the youth is still holding steadfast to old beliefs on femininity and masculinity. This is highly problematic as we push further and further into an age where body image is everything.

Media encourages love for your body (the body you were born into), and at the same time requires constant maintenance to upkeep. Edut (2003) puts this entire conundrum into an individualistic but relevant statement when she says:

…how significantly the myths of our culture influence our lives. Most of us intellectually know what fashion ads and airbrushed models are unrealistic and that very few people look like Kate
Moss, including the model herself. Yet, emotionally we’re in denial about it. We must be, or we wouldn’t spend so much time and money trying to look like something that doesn’t even exist. Perhaps there’s a deeper layer of mythology that we need to uncover—our own (p. vi).

This final statement attests to not only the way media, like Disney, infiltrates our minds, but also the way in which society dictates how we, as individuals, are socialized to forego our own aspirations and intentions for a consumerist, shallow society ideal. In this statement, Edut (2003) reminds us not to engage in cultural obsessions over body type—and, in broader terms, not to succumb to the way we are supposed to act within our own gender, and instead, focus on taking back our true selves, whatever we may look like within the gender binary and beauty ideal.

But what can be done to change the images that the Disney Princesses uphold? Perhaps a new redesign of the princesses in their original glory, or a stronger position with greater solidarity between each other would help to alter their image. I do not think this is a strong enough solution, however, with their stories being so genderized. Instead, Disney could feasibly focus less on changing the original stories, and instead, alter them so that the princess is a stronger, more relatable role model of young girls. Recalling Orenstein’s (2012) Andy Mooney quote about the construction of a princess, there is no specific definition for a princess; maybe America simply does not need any more princesses. The power that Disney has is so, so powerful. They should use that power of influence and nostalgia to create princesses that embody morality and leadership characteristics, not employ and perpetuate gender stereotypes and hyper-femininity.

References


THE COMPLETIST GEEK. (2014). A check-list of all animated Disney movies. Retrieved from...


I have never been a victim of sexual assault. I will never know exactly what a person feels, experiences or acts like after this horrible violation happens to them. I write this paper because I it is my promise to those who can’t speak to bring awareness to this epidemic that is slowly eating us alive. Little is talked about sexual assault because our culture has made it somewhat of a taboo and if you were to speak about rape then you are literally ripping off the rose color glasses many of us are wearing. Pulling from activists and stories from the 1970s to present day, I see bow rape culture has changed and transformed, adapting to the antidote. I know that I do not fight this battle alone, especially now that there have been many of us who are sick and tired of waiting for rape culture to die once and for all. This paper reviews the changes that have happened in the United States over the decades and what is being done in our society to make rape culture a thing of the past.

“There are many truths of which the full meaning cannot be realized until personal experience has brought it home.”

- John Stuart Mill
Introducing Myself

I have never been a victim of sexual assault. I will never know exactly what a person feels, experiences, or acts like after this horrible violation happens to them. I wrote this paper because I feel like it is my promise to those who can’t speak to bring awareness to this epidemic that is slowly eating us alive. Little is talked about sexual assault because our culture has made it somewhat of a taboo, and if you were to speak about rape, then you are literally ripping off the rose-colored glasses many of us are wearing. If going outside the social norm is what it will take to bring awareness to this issue, then call me an outsider. I know that I do not fight this battle alone. I was influenced by Susan Brownmiller’s (1975) writings about rape from her viewpoint and how she is more of an observer (like myself) because she has never experienced what so many of our peers have. Although Brownmiller writes from a different decade, both of our missions have intersecting values and goals. My research asks: How do we understand rape culture as it has evolved over time? How do we understand the circumstances around victims and survivors of sexual assault, and how are higher education institutions handling this epidemic?

Anyone who has ever been to college knows the uniqueness of each experience that is thrown their way. Whether you identify on a whole spectrum or maybe do not even chose to identify with anything, your experiences as a new adult come hurdling towards you like an avalanche. Each experience is unique in its own special way like the friends you make, the type of clothes you wear, the car you drive, the gym you visit, the clubs you join or maybe clubs are not your thing. Despite these many opportunities, there are times in an individual’s life where one’s whole world is altered or changed forever. Everyone’s college experience is different, and sometimes events happen, terrible and demeaning events, where we are unable to comprehend why it happened in the first place. I would say that my life is pretty average. I was 18 years old when I started my freshman year of college, I was able to make a great group of friends, and I joined several clubs. I could, however, tell you that I was a naïve young woman coming into college because I did not know about all the “hidden dangers” that a woman, like me or anyone, could face growing up. In my short time as a
college freshman, I would have known two women among my friend group to be victims of sexual assault.

High school does not give you the tools you need to understand how to deal with the topic of rape and sexual assault, especially when you are in the presence of someone who has just been a victim of sexual assault. High school does not teach to never put your drink down at a party, or make sure you travel with a group of people so you are not attacked. And they never teach you about what your options are when you or someone you care about is faced with a situation that was out of one’s control. What does someone even say to a person who was the victim of rape? It is tough because you never know what to do until you are in this situation.

When a friend comes forward to tell you something that happened to him/her, what you say or how you act can either push him/her to get help or make the person internalize one’s feelings and the event. It can be a maddening process when trying to help someone you care about after she or he has been raped. It is frustrating because you do not know exactly what to say to a victim. Living in a rape culture makes the circumstances around helping someone who is a victim of sexual assault even more challenging.

Anyone who is like me would understand that getting this person help in a world that is so quick to disregard them would know that it is in the best interest of the victim that you believe them word for word.¹

I do not want my friends to be just another statistic. This makes me realize that my path is to do everything in my power to make sure that no victim of a crime as monstrous as rape ever feels alone or forgotten. In order for this to happen, we as a collective unit need to put an end to rape culture and return the stolen power to those who are victims and survivors of rape.

Terminology

The following terms are important to my thesis and help contextualize my writing.

Rape Culture:
When society normalizes sexualized violence, it accepts and creates rape culture. In more complex terms, “[Rape Culture] is a set of beliefs that encourage male sexual aggression and

¹ Author Note: Italicized sentences are my reflections about sexual violence as contemplated while I was writing this paper. These words are intended to provoke thought at different points of the paper as readers move through the essay.
supports violence against women. It is a society where violence is seen as sexy and sexuality as violent. In a rape culture, women perceive a continuum of threatened violence that ranges from sexual remarks to sexual touching to rape itself. A rape culture condones physical and emotional terrorism against women as the norm...In a rape culture both men and women assume that sexual violence is a fact of life, inevitable (Buchwald, Fletcher, & Roth, 1992, p. viii).

**Sexual Assault:**
The sexual exploitation, forcible penetration, or an act of sexual contact on the body of another person, male or female, without his or her consent (“sexual assault”, 2015).

**Campus Community:**
I define this empirically as anyone who is affected by the actions that happen on or within a college campus. This could mean students, faculty, staff, and even parents or guardians of students.

**Victim blaming:**
Victim blaming occurs when the victim of a crime or any wrongful act is held entirely or partially responsible for the harm that befell them (Valenti, 2013, p.2).

**Consent:**
A clear, unambiguous, and voluntary agreement between the participants to engage in specific sexual activity (New York State Governor’s Press Office, 2014, para. 11).

While these terms are readily available to us on the Internet or in books, society still has a lot of missing or incorrect information about sexual assault. Fisher, Cullen, & Turner (2000) report that nine out of ten victims of sexual assault will know their perpetrator (p. 17). Therefore, the concept of “the strangers in the bushes” is just a myth and the real danger is lurking within our bars, our dorms, and our campus. On a college campus, one in five women will be raped as well as one in nine men and the age group most vulnerable to sexual assault is the 18-24 range (McMahon, 2010). There are people within the United States who simply do not believe that sexual assaults are a major issue on college campuses and in communities. It is our responsibility to raise awareness and bring rape and sexual assault from out of the shadows to make it visible to all. Calling out rape culture when you see it can only help the fight go further. Whether it is a friend making a sexist joke or you overhearing something that sounds wrong, make it known to those...
individuals that what they are doing or saying is not okay. If there is one thing that I have learned while being a college student, it is that talking to someone peer-to-peer is honestly one of the best ways to reach out to someone. This is how you start a cultural revolution.

**Rape Culture: Why is it Still a Thing?**

Rape Culture: Why is it Still a Thing? I ask myself this question all the time. You would think that after the second wave of feminism struck in the 1960s, where so many individuals fought for women’s equality, we would be in a culture of respect and understanding. However, maybe I am the one wearing the rose-colored glasses. Some of you reading this might be conforming to society by believing, “I don’t think that we live in a rape culture” or “I am pretty sure rape culture isn’t a thing anymore.” Well one of my goals for this paper is that it will persuade you otherwise and that you will begin to see the world with a more informed and realistic lens. Has anyone ever told you to always watch your drink at a party? Have you ever been told that the outfit that you are wearing might give off the wrong impression to others? Has anyone ever told you that you had to score with the ladies or guys at the bar, and if you did not, you would not be seen as dominant? Well if you answered yes to any of these question, and believe me there are so many more I could go on to talk about, then you are living in a rape culture!

The term rape culture is prevalent in articles, books, lectures, and online, but does anyone ever think about how the idea of rape culture came to be? According to the site Feminist Whore (2009), the term “rape culture” was first created for a documentary in 1974 titled “rape culture” where it gave the audience the perspective of male-male rape and later discussed the idea of power versus gender. This documentary was first produced in 1975 but then it was later revised in 1983:

This was the first documentary to establish the relationship between rape and our culture’s sexual fantasies. The film shows the connections between violence and “normal” patterns of behavior. The film also attempts to expand our society’s narrow and sexist concept of rape to its real and accurate limits. The notion that rape is an isolated sexual perversion, the product of an individual’s deranged mind, is dispelled in this film (para 6).

The directors of this documentary, Mary Daly and Emily Culpepper, additionally examined sexism within
films, music, and advertising, and they analyzed how these outlets potentially lead to violence against women. This documentary was the first source to coin the term “rape culture,” which gave it the definition that society was looking for and needed (Feminist Whore, 2009, para 4).

**Back in the Day….**

Time traveling back to the 1970s, we see a whole new feminist movement pop up. This is known as the second wave of feminism where feminist activists fought for sexual liberation and equality. Within the decade that Susan Brownmiller (1975) authored *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, an estimated twenty-six million individuals were victims of forcible rape (FBI crime statistics, 2014). The monumental things that feminism was doing at this time was expanding our knowledge of what we know about rape and how rape is not just about sex, rape is about power and control. Life in the 1970s was changing quickly and women were not going to stand by and watch their potential to make a change in society go out the window.

Brownmiller (1975) was a pioneer of her time because she ripped off the rose-colored glasses in an effort to make people see what was really happening in our culture around sexual violence. In her book *Against Our Will*, Brownmiller (1975) clearly states how a rapist uses society as a weapon against the victim:

“She was asking for it” is the classic way a rapist shifts the burden of blame from himself to his victim. The popularity of the belief that a woman seduces or “cock-teases” a man into rape or precipitates a rape by incautious behavior, is part of the smoke screen that men throw up to obscure their action. The insecurity of women runs so deep that many, possibly most, rape victims agonize afterward in an effort to uncover what it was in their behavior, their manner, their dress that triggered this awful act against them (p 312).

Brownmiller wrote about rape in a time where the idea of rape was becoming less of a taboo and more of something that happens in our society. At the time of Brownmiller’s early writings, we understood power as men having all the control. In a controversial appeal on how to understand why men rape, Brownmiller (1975) wrote about Jane Goodall and the Chimpanzees:

Jane Goodall, studying her wild chimpanzees at the Gombe Stream reserve, noted that the chimps, male and female, were “very promiscuous,
but this does not mean that every female will accept every male that courts her.” She recorded her observations of one female in heat, who showed the telltale pink swelling of her genital area, who nevertheless displayed an aversion to one particular male who pursued her. “Though he once shook her out of the tree in which she had sought refuge, we never saw him actually ‘rape’ her,” Goodall wrote, adding, however, "Nonetheless, quite often he managed to get his way through dogged persistence." Another student of animal behavior, Leonard Williams, has stated categorically, "The male monkey cannot in fact mate with the female without her invitation and willingness to cooperate. In monkey society there is no such thing as rape, prostitution, or even passive consent (p 13).

Although Brownmiller writes with power and influence, the above quote implies that all men have this primal need to reproduce and that they cannot control themselves when they see a woman in “heat.” This critique is important because both men and women can be victims of sexual assault. The paragraph implies that only heterosexual man on woman rape is true rape. This is never the case; anyone can be a victim of rape and sexual assault no matter what category of identity a person occupies. Susan Brownmiller’s book Against Our Will, furthered the notion that rape culture is prevalent in our homes, schools and community. She writes this as a reflection of what our society has become.

When Susan Brownmiller released her research, she revealed to the world the ‘dark side of the moon.’ Writing about rape culture from her outlook brought on a lot of criticism from a variety of people, each with their own perspective on how rape culture is really integrated into our culture. Edward Shorter is a historian who critiqued Brownmiller’s groundbreaking book. Shorter’s (1977) essay “On Writing the History of Rape” argues against Brownmiller’s claim that “rape amounts to ‘a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a constant state of fear’” (p. 13). The critique he makes is that not all men have an instinct to rape and not all women are living in constant fear. Another critique he makes of Brownmiller is her belief that all rapes are political (Shorter, 1977). Although Shorter criticizes Brownmiller’s work, he also praises her contributions bringing rape culture to mainstream discussion. Shorter does agree with Brownmiller that some aspects of rape have an undertone of politics in it, but
he wonders if all rapes that Brownmiller recorded were political in nature:

Short of falling into slavery, these women could scarcely have been more victimized by the male-controlled social, economic, and political systems in which they found themselves (Shorter, p. 476).

**A Different World**

Christine Helliwell’s *It’s Only a Penis* (2000) goes into the understanding of rape within another culture far different from our own. While Helliwell was studying the Dayak culture, a situation arose where a women was almost the victim of rape. What Helliwell noticed about the ensuing events was far different from our own culture:

Thinking to obtain information about local women’s responses to rape, I began to question her. Had she been frightened? I asked. Of course she had. Wouldn’t I feel frightened if I awoke in the dark to find an unknown person inside my mosquito net? Wouldn’t I be angry? Why then, I asked, hadn’t she taken the opportunity, while he was entangled in her mosquito net, to kick him hard or to hit him with one of the many wooden implements near at hand? She looked shocked. Why would she do that? She asked after all, he hadn’t hurt her. No, but he had wanted to, I replied. She looked at me with puzzlement. Not able to find a local word for rape in my vocabulary, I scrabbled to explain myself: "He was trying to have sex with you," I said, "although you didn't want to. He was trying to hurt you." She looked at me, more with pity than with puzzlement now, although both were mixed in her expression. "Tin [Christine], it's only a penis," she said. "How can a penis hurt anyone?" (p. 790).

In this article, The Dayak culture is not familiar with the word "rape" and is baffled that a penis might be used to hurt someone. This shows us that violence has social and cultural place at its root. This article ties into the idea of rape culture because it is in the argument that rape is socially produced versus an innate outcome.

**Conditioning**

Bringing the rape culture conversation back into more recent decades, we are still left at an impasse. We have created this environment where women are the ones who are told to “watch your drink” or “make sure you walk home in a group, especially at night.” On the flip side, men are not taught to take these same precautions. Other authors, like Joseph Weinberg and Michael Biernbaum, write about rape culture, arguing:
Until now, rape has been an invisible issue for most men. Say the word rape to most women and there is a shudder, an involuntary muscular reaction or some other visceral response. Certainly not all women understand the dynamics of rape culture, but most have a strong body sense of what rape means. Mention rape to most men and there is not a comparable physical response (1993, p. 89).

What I am about to say might be strange at first but just hear me out. Maybe we as a society have put men into this space where rape should not affect or even happen to them. I know for a fact that we need to bring men back into the conversation because it is hurting them just as much as it is hurting us. Living in the 21st century gives us privilege to understand that it is not just heterosexual women who are victims of sexual assault. It can be anyone. Men, women, straight, gay, lesbian, queer, regardless of identity, everyone must face this problem head on if we are to truly make any form of change.

Rape culture affects everyone; men, women, straight, LGBTQ, all ethnicities. “Most women and girls limit their behavior because of the existence of rape. Most women and girls live in fear of rape. Men, in general, do not” (Rape Culture, para 1, n.d.). Living in the 21st century brings so much more pressures on men to dominate women, who are seen as weak and easily manipulated. It has taken many scholars and activists, which I will discuss later in my paper, to bring to light this epidemic. Rape victims can come from different spaces among the spectrum of identity. They do not have to be heterosexual or white and they can come from any social-economic status. Individuals who identify with the LGBTQ community have greater risks when it comes to rape and sexual violence. According to a 2010 report from the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control (Walters, Chen & Breiding, 2013), one in eight lesbian women and nearly half of bisexual women will be victims of rape in their lifetime (p. 10). Four in ten gay men and nearly half of bisexual men will experience some form of sexual violence in their lifetime (p. 11). For bisexual women it has been reported that 46 percent have experienced sexual assault in their lifetime (p. 1).

The Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN) states that “while 80 percent of all reported rapes are against white women, minorities are more likely to be assaulted” (as cited in “Sexualized Violence Statistics”, n.d.). The rate of
rape or a violent sexual act among blacks is around 18.8 percent and 6.8 percent for Asian/Pacific Islander. "The statistics for non-whites are probably low since barriers to reporting would be increased for women of color" (RAINN as cited in Humboldt State University, n.d.). "Most women and girls limit their behavior because of the existence of rape. Most women and girls live in fear of rape. Men, in general, do not" ("Rape Culture, para 1, n.d.).

**History Repeats Itself**

*It would be an obscene comment to make, suggesting that absolutely nothing has changed in our culture to make rape and sexual assault more visible to everyone.*

Several recent rape cases on college campuses show how much work there needs to be done and what improvements we as a society need to make to rectify harmful behaviors that fester inside a rape culture. Whether their stories took place in the 1970s or today, the following individuals tell their experiences as survivors in hopes that it will change the rape culture under which we still live.

Katherine McKee was in a Michigan hotel room when she was raped by someone she considered her friend. Her rape took place in the 1970s (Dillon, 2014). McKee was an actress and a former Las Vegas showgirl riding along on tour buses with her boyfriend and always hanging out with his crew, of which her rapist was a part. He lured her into his hotel room that night by asking her if she would mind getting him some barbeque from a place down the road and then bringing it to him. He was stalking her like prey, ready to pounce on her as soon as she opened the door. "I remember I walked in the door, and he had a robe and cap on. He took the ribs from my hands and just grabbed me" (Dillon, para. 9, 2014). After this event, McKee never spoke a word to anyone about what happened, not even her boyfriend. Why you may ask? The reason why she never spoke a word about this to anyone was because her rapist was Bill Cosby. He had too much power in the public eye. Why would anyone believe the girlfriend of a musician over the man America idolizes so much? Now that she has come out with her story, many other victims have surfaced as well, however some of these cases happened decades ago and cannot legally progress further. McKee’s thoughts on Bill Cosby after the rape happened capture the frequent imbalance in power between victims and their abusers: “I chalked it up to
another powerful person in Hollywood who just felt he could take what he wanted from women” (para. 21).

Emma Sulkowicz, a student at Columbia University, used her senior thesis project as a public outlet to make visible her rape accusations and the way she experienced her college’s response. In her project, Emma carries her mattress that she was sexually assaulted on around the Columbia University campus in order to get the justice she deserves. Emma’s story details a rape that took place in 2012 and describes her school’s slow crawl in doing anything about her complaint (Culp-Ressler, 2014). Both Emma and her rapist still resided on campus and her case argues that Columbia University did nothing to remove her rapist from campus or try to help her in anyway. According to Culp-Ressler, the university mishandled her case, almost like they wanted this case, and potentially other cases like it, swept way under the rug. The events after Emma’s rape only pushed her further, and it took her activism to new lengths. By carrying her mattress around as a symbol for the injustice victims face, she unintentionally sparked an international conversation about college rape and sexual assault. Carrying around her mattress produced support from within her college community and together they organized an event called “collective carries” where community members helped lift the mattress to show support to Emma and survivors everywhere (Culp-Ressler, 2014).

Emma Sulkowicz carried around this mattress not just for herself, but for all victims and survivors of sexual assault who are voiceless as well as all those who do not get the chance to speak up and let their voices be heard. She speaks about her rape now because she knows that what she is saying will only help those who have been a victim, such as the many women who have now come forward as victims of Bill Cosby, and to know that they are not alone. It is a crime against them and it is a crime against our society when we let this disregard for humanity fall through the cracks. No matter what decade we come from, a rape victim deserves the rights that all of us have. Just because someone was raped doesn’t make the person less of a person. These two cases alone show how much of a struggle it is to come forward, but it is a stepping stone for those who want to fight this brutality towards our peers.

Gender-based Violence:
What We Know
The truth about the present is the increasing number of sexual assault cases across the United States, particularly in higher education settings. College campuses across the United States have reported over 5,000 sexual assault cases, but the reality is approximately 6 times that (Fisher, Cullen & Turner, 2000).

Fisher, Cullen, & Turner reported that nine out of ten victims of sexual assault will know their perpetrator (2000). Therefore, the concept of “the strangers in the bushes” is just a myth and the real danger is lurking within our bars, our dorms, and our campus. On a college campus, one in five women will be raped as well as one in nine men and the age group most vulnerable to sexual assault is the 18-24 range (McMahon, 2010). On college campuses the ones who are most vulnerable to this type of assault are freshman and sophomores. This group is at a greater risk for victimization rather than juniors and seniors because of how they are seen as “easy targets.” It’s inconceivable to think that we put blame on these students who are coming to college for the first time, trying to figure out who they are, and just because they do not know what hidden dangers lurk around each corner, they are left to be victimized. Every two minutes there is someone in America who is raped (Burnett, 2009).

Burnett’s 2009 study revealed that, “In NCAA Division I schools, more male athletes are reported to the judicial boards for sexual assault than any other students” (p. 466). The male athlete population fosters rape culture because sports are sex segregated and male athletes are put on such a high pedestal. Their aggression is seen as a good thing and they basically get rewarded for being aggressive and violent. “Most men don’t think of themselves as assailants. But their T-shirts, jokes and comments perpetuate the culture in which the minority can commit assaults with minimal risk” (Cook, 2012, p. 16).

I am not the first person nor am I in the first college organization that has thought of measures to keep our campus safe by using proactive measures. Kristen Bain (2002) writes about her experiences during college while trying to take preventable measures in ending rape on her campus. Bain states she was denied a permit to sell pepper spray because the administration thought that girls could use it in a “vengeful manner” (p. 26). The administration also informed Bain that giving a woman on campus a way to defend herself made her too great of a liability. This is wrong. Although this
article was written in 2002 when our
country was fighting the war on terror,
Bain makes the point that “not only is
rape a barbaric crime of power and
hate, it is the most effective method of
perpetuating the patriarchal system”
(p.26). Rape terrorizes and intimidates
a victim. The way our society handles
cases just silences and makes victims
feel shame for something that they did
not do. This perpetuates rape culture.

**Gender-Based Violence:**

**Sociocultural**

When Levy wrote *Women and Violence*
(2008), she pulled from different spaces
where women are often faced with
violence. Levy reveals how society has
put women in a dangerous space that is
swarmed with ideologies that accept
men’s violence towards women. *Women
and Violence* analyzes data from all over
the world and looks at how different
forms of oppression are being used to
manipulate victims into submission.
This book helps reveal all the pain,
subliminal ideology and rape culture
that societies are going through.

Sociocultural theories explain violence
against women as stemming from
social structures or cultural conditions.
Advocates of these theories say that
men abuse women ‘because they can.’
They mean that in our society men
who are inclined to abuse women for
any number of personal reasons find it
easy to justify it and get away with it
without being punished or stopped
(Levy, p. 20).

Our own culture has been living with
gender based violence for far too long.
Violence against women only
rationalizes rape culture and makes it
hard to pull our culture out of the hole
we are digging. The theory explains
how violence towards women is often
glorified and makes society think that it
is justifiably acceptable.

Feminist author Jessica Valenti has
become a well-known activist who
speaks about rape culture. In *Yes Means
Yes* (2008), Valenti looks at how
women’s sexuality inevitably
reinforces rape culture in our society.
Several examples that she writes about
establishes that rape culture has fully
integrated itself into our culture. From
gang rapes to purity balls, Valenti makes
the argument that “sexualizing girls is
not just about beauty standards, it’s also
about reinforcing traditional gender
roles and the purity norm” (p. 302).
Valenti further argues:

Battling the myth is just one step in
dismantling rape culture, of course. But
if, as activist, writers, and people who
care about ending violence against
women, we can start to understand and
talk about the way expectations about women’s sexuality play into a culture that condones rape, we’ll have that much more ammunition for the fight ahead (p. 303).

Within our culture this is completely accurate. Whether we see it or not, there have been many challenges to society trying to change our way of life. The bigots that run society are the ones who need to be taken down in order to change our rape culture into a culture of respect.

**Sixty-seven**

As an undergraduate attending college, one of my concerns for myself and potential students and their families is how safe a campus is and what a campus does in order to protect its students. The Clery Act of 1992 makes it so colleges are legally obligated to inform students as well as a campus community about any crime that takes place on the campus. Jeanne Clery was a rape and murder victim in 1986 at Lehigh University (Clery Center, 2012). After Jeanne’s death, her parents made it their mission to make college campuses all around the United States have a formal and mandated reporting system for all crimes that happen on campus. When the Clery Act took effect, it meant that all colleges had to disclose their security policies, make their crime log public, warn all students and employees on campus about immediate threats, and help ensure rights for victims of campus sexual assaults (Clery Center, 2012). This legislation is important when living in a rape culture, because it lights the match underneath colleges all over the United States in order to further progress our rights as citizens.

Prior to the Clery Act, one of the most vital regulations that has ever come out of the U.S Department of Education is Title IX. Title IX was created in 1972 and it states,

No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance (Title IX, Education Amendments of 1972).

Not only does this bill help with athletics and a woman’s right to an education, it also helps with sexual harassment. Under Title IX all colleges are required to:

…define sex discrimination (including sexual violence) and publish a policy stating that the school does not discriminate on the basis of sex, have and distribute procedures for students
to file complaints when sexual harassment, discrimination, or violence takes place, appoint a Title IX coordinator to oversee these activities, review complaints, and deal with patterns or systemic problems (even when there are no formal complaints) and distribute the Title IX coordinator’s name to students (Lam, n.d., para 8).

Those who took a stand for what is right have helped shape this future and strived to give us hope. If it was not for those who aided in the fight to get legislation like Title IX and The Clery Act, our lives could be very different. As of March 2015, there have been sixty-seven universities that are under federal investigations under Title IX compliance mandates. This means that there are sixty-seven schools that we can change to establish better support for victims and all those who are affected by rape. Those with the rose-colored glasses off need to seize this opportunity to change the culture surrounding rape and it can and will start here.

**Rape Culture: Personal Experience**

As someone who knows what rape culture means to society, it gives me a special privilege to look at the work to fight rape culture though an informed lens. However, when certain situations happen, I do not need my privilege to see how messed up a situation is becoming, and it just shows me how much more work there needs to me done to eradicate gender-based violence.

In the second year of my undergraduate experience, I was fortunate enough to be a part of the team that brought Jackson Katz to our campus. Jackson Katz is one of America's leading anti-sexist male activists. As an educator, author, filmmaker, and cultural theorist, he is internationally recognized for his groundbreaking work in the field of gender violence prevention education and critical media literacy (“Jackson Katz: Brief Biography”, 2015). Being a sophomore who was part of the group that was able to bring him to campus made me feel that the work I was doing in educating our campus about rape culture was really working. Katz is an internationally known educator and scholar who fights for gender equality, and he was going to speak to my peers on my own campus about rape culture and how we can take it down. So, imagine my disappointment when many of the athletes attending the lecture behaved in vulgar and obscene ways by making rape jokes while Katz was speaking, and during and after the
lecture, sending out more offensive comments about rape and sexual assault over YikYak. It was one of the worst representations of our campus community that I have ever seen. The way that our school was presented that evening proved that rape culture still exists and it is more of a danger to our campus community than anything else. It made me so angry to see that a majority of our student athletes were rude, obnoxious, and represented The College at Brockport in such a negative light. This experience exemplifies how much work still needs to be done in order to end rape culture.

**Arsenal: Politicians**

Two major allies who have joined the crusade when striving to end sexual assault on college campuses are Andrew Cuomo and Kirsten Gillibrand. Both of these individuals are New York politicians and together they have put the issue of campus sexual assault on the legislative map.

New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo’s “Enough is Enough” campaign helps create a uniform sexual assault policy on college campuses across New York State. According to the campaign, “specially trained members will be on call twenty-four hours a day to respond to sexual assault cases, …[ and] State Police will also develop response protocols and training courses to share with campus partners” (Shaohui, 2015, para. 7). This legislation would be established in both public and private schools and will guarantee that 1.2 million students are protected.

United States Senator Kirsten Gillibrand has put her name on the Campus Accountability and Safety Act (2015). This act will create incentives to protect students based on how sexual assaults are reported and handled by college administrators. I recently had the privilege to sit down with Senator Gillibrand along with Title IX coordinators across the Rochester area and we discussed the Campus Accountability and Safety Act. This bill’s intention is to establish new campus resources for student survivors, enacting minimum training standards for all who come into contact with a victim. This act will help get a better understanding of the campus climate with campus wide surveys. The act also ensures that all schools provide a uniform process in regards to student disciplinary hearings and will help enforce Title IX and the Clery Act compliance mandates. Colleges and universities that do not abide by this bill will be forced to pay heavier fines (Gillibrand, 2015).
Arsenal: The College at Brockport

Our campus has made strides when trying to combat rape culture on campus. From my own personal experience there have been clubs and organizations that get the bigger picture. Places like the Women’s Center, the Counseling Center and The Center for Select Respect are safe places for all students, no matter where one comes from. Within The Center for Select Respect, a Restore representative is there to help assist with programing and educational components. The Women and Gender Studies program, Women and Gender Studies Organization (WGSO), Voices for Choice (VOX) and Sexual Orientations United for Liberation (SOUL) each play an important role in conversations to end gender-based violence and rape on college campuses as well as help create an inclusive environment for everyone.

Here on Brockport’s campus we have movements like One Billion Rising, Clothesline Project, and Take Back the Night to help support victims of rape. For the past three years, One Billion Rising has been put on by the Women and Gender Studies Program in collaboration with Dance Studies. It is a dance of awareness for those who are victims of domestic violence. The Clothesline Project takes t-shirts made by those who are victims of sexual assault or those who support victims and puts them on display for the college community. Take Back the Night is a rally that happens around the campus where marchers walk to raise awareness about campus sexual assault and rape.

Keep Moving Forward

How can we stop an epidemic from infecting our college campuses? This question is by far one of the hardest to answer. How do we continue to bring awareness to this silent but prevalent danger that lurks “unseen” in all college campuses around the United States? Kurt Cobain (1991), yes that’s Kurt Cobain from Nirvana, is quoted:

Rape is one of the most terrible crimes on earth. And it happens every few minutes...The problem with groups who deal with rape is that they try to educate women about how to defend themselves. What really needs to be done is teaching men not to rape. Go to the source and start there (cited in Hobbs, 1991, para 22).

In my opinion, the best way to end sexual assaults on a college campus is by using proactive instead of reactive measures. Making the topic of sexual assault known to everyone and starting the conversation about the dangers of
unwanted sexual interaction that are on a college campus would benefit everyone. Rape culture is prevalent and in the forefront of perpetuating the acts of sexual assault. If colleges were to put an end to the demeaning and belittling words or phrases that are so rampant within our culture, we could see some real changes in our campus culture and create an environment that is suitable for everyone to live in.

Teaching about rape culture is never easy, especially if the people you are teaching do not see anything wrong with what our culture has become. With proactive measures, the most successful approach to educate classmates about sexual assault is on a peer-to-peer level. Trying to understand the background people come from will help in this fight because we can almost cater the needs of each individual when we know how they approach situations in life. It is important also to get an understanding of ways students interpret rape, sexual assault, and consent. Flood a college campus with flyers or anything that is appealing to the eyes to get people to look at the facts.

April has been established as Sexual Assault Awareness Month. Colleges all across the United States come together in April for solidarity with victims of sexual assault. In the end education is our biggest ally when trying to break down rape culture and establish a benign place for victims to feel encouraged and safe in their time of need.

**Momentum**

Looking at where we came from to where we are now, a lot has changed. Brownmiller’s work on rape culture explored where few wanted to go. Once seen as a topic from ‘the dark side of the moon,’ Brownmiller (1975) explored everything that our culture has cast out and with that, she helped push the social movement to end rape culture. Looking forward to the 21st century, there is still a lot of work to be done, but we as a culture are taking a stand to end rape culture. Key events through the decades have put us into a space were will not be silenced anymore.

What do we do now? Despite the progress that we have supposedly made, what is being done? During this paper I have given ideas, resources, thoughts, and changes that many of us have seen over the decades when it comes to rape culture. Our culture is changing and today we are not limited to speaking out about the things that affect our daily lives. My writing seeks to remove the rose-colored glasses off a person’s face.
and expose sexual assault. I believe that it is our generation’s duty to establish and incorporate ways that we can help victims and make college campuses a safer place for all. What happened to my friends was inexcusable and this is a personal battle cry to change our culture and fix the system that is so broken.

There should be no more victim blaming, no more siding with a rapist, and no more obstacles that make it hard for victims and survivors to come forward and talk about rape and sexual assault. If we are truly to change the culture, we as individuals need to rise up, come together, and take back what is ours. Our voice. Voices carry.

References


SEXUALIZED VIOLENCE STATISTICS. (n.d.). Retrieved from the Humboldt State University website: http://www2.humboldt.edu/stoprape/statistics.html


Sexual assault is an issue that seems to be swept under the table rather than eliminated in our military. In other words, it is handled and we are aware of it, but we try to hide and mitigate the reality of how bad sexual assault is. We find that those in charge want to maintain an image of heroism and portray military members as almost perfect. In reality we know that military members are people too, and they may not be as perfect as made out to be. We all have goals and aspirations that we want to achieve, and sexual assault is something our military needs to focus on more in order to help us excel towards those goals.

Sexual assault is a recurring issue that arises in both the military and civilian sector. Over the years, military personnel have applied various training techniques in order to help minimize the number of sexual assaults within military life. This training, though beneficial, may be more effective if it was conducted on more military recruits, particularly, college students who are in training to enter military service. As a member of the military, I understand that not everyone comes from the same walk of life, and not everyone is instilled with the same morals and respect for others. These differences make the need for sexual assault education and training in the military paramount to
establishing and maintaining a culture of respect that all military personnel must uphold regardless of prior educational experience.

As a college student I am aware that sexual assault occurs on and off campus. Sexual assault is an issue that has to be dealt with on an individual basis because not every sexual assault situation is the same. Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) students may have a bit more training than regular college students because they are required to undergo specific courses in leadership and sexual assault. But how does this training help or hinder the transition into the military? If the military trains all recruits on subjects such as sexual assault, why do service members continue to commit sexual crimes? Is it the sheer lack of care for others, or are military personnel placed in situations where they feel compelled to dominate through sexual violence?

I interviewed two female and one male ROTC members about the annual training that they attend on sexual assault to discover what kind of impact this training has on participants. Each responder disclosed different experiences regarding sexual assault; some felt comfortable speaking about the topic, some had no experiences at all, and others explained what occurred to a friend. None of the participants disclosed being victimized or suffering from a sexual assault occurrence.

I am interested in using the experiences and perceptions of sexual assault training within the military to identify trends and possible alterations in current training procedures. The goal is not to recreate what training standards ROTC students have prior to entering the military, but rather, to identify ways to make it better and more adaptable to everyday life of a college student entering military service. Whatever training approaches the military uses, there should be no differences in what knowledge is obtained by ROTC cadet/midshipmen or brand new privates just completing boot camp training. This research seeks to identify new ways of presenting training on sexual assault to ROTC students in an effort to reduce sexual violence in the military. My research asks:

- What is the perception of sexual assault within the military as viewed by students in the ROTC program?
- Does the current training requirement for sexual assault help limit its occurrences in the perception of ROTC students?
- What level of awareness does an
ROTC student have on how to make a report in the event a sexual assault was to occur in their presence or happen to them?

To add texture to a traditional research approach I weave into my research paper a fictional story that depicts the life of a young woman who wants to enter the military through an ROTC program. For the purpose of creating a visual identity that the reader can identify with, I call the young woman Susan. Susan is an African American female growing up in a poverty stricken neighborhood. Her story begins in her high school years and is told using first person so readers can empathize with her character and the experiences she endures.

Prologue

The military has battled an invisible war for over ten years. This war termed as unseen is “sexual assault.” But in the eyes of others, the question that arises is whether or not this war truly is invisible? To understand the circumstances the military has to overcome, I have decided to tell a story of an ROTC student who is faced with this oppression. Some of the story that is depicted may or may not be fictional. My goals for this essay writing are not to prove that sexual assault in the military is an invisible war, but rather to show that this is a war that can be fought from within. Just like any other war we’ve experienced throughout our history, it takes time to fully identify the enemy and their capabilities. Unfortunately, the enemies we are fighting in this war are the same men and women who have promised to serve and protect the country we love.

Before the War

I can remember the days as if they were yesterday. I started my high school days happy as ever, but the days leading up to my graduation didn’t end the same. I was a college athlete on the girls’ varsity softball team for four years. I did really well until my senior year when I met Jay. Jay was so sweet to me and I just wanted to give him all my time. He attended every game up until my senior year. I often worried about where he was and what he was doing? Not knowing where my boyfriend was (the
love of my life, so I thought) left me feeling bothersome and depressed most days. I started to seek attention from unwanted places and that’s when I learned that I could have the attention from other boys if Jay wasn’t going to give it to me.

As our prom approached I found out that Jay was seeing another girl. I didn’t know who she was but found out through a friend that she was attending a cross-town high school. I fell into a mode of not wanting any contact from the outside world after finding out Jay cheated on me. Missing classes and not attending softball practice, I wept in my room and hid from my mom and dad, but soon they found out about my despair. I was taken to a psychiatrist and eventually able to insert myself back into being a high school student.

A week away from prom I was approached by a guy on my high school baseball team. He invited me to the prom with a note he slipped to me in class. The guy’s name was Nicholas. He seemed respectful and worth my time, but I told him I didn’t want to attend the prom because I knew my old boyfriend Jay would be there. We started to hangout after the prom passed, and I started to attend all of his baseball games. We would celebrate his games with a kissing session under the bleachers, and I couldn’t believe how respectful he was to me, never trying to force me to do something with him that I didn’t want to do.

After several weeks of seeing each other, Nicholas asked me to attend an after-party. He came to pick me up around 11 p.m. on a Friday. The party was loud and everyone was drinking. Though I smelled a strange odor that I’ve never smelled before, I thought it was exciting to be around everyone dancing and having a good time. I thought about how I was once a depressed girl trapped in her room, but now I’m on a dance floor at a house party with over one hundred other teenagers. After a few dances and drinks I could feel that I was intoxicated and I could barely keep
myself from swaying back and forth. Nicholas held me up and often placed his hands on the small of my back; it made me feel wanted and protected. We walked towards a part of the house that had the weird smell coming out of it. I never smoked before so the effects of the smoke that I inhaled as I entered the room started to make me feel sleepy and I began to lose consciousness.

Some things I do remember. I remember that I was in a room with Nicholas, more baseball players, and a few girls. As time went by and I became more and more sleepy, people started to leave the room. Girls left in pairs and some of the guys escorted their girlfriends or dates out of the room. I didn’t care. I had Nicholas holding me and often asking if I was okay. I felt my eyes close and began to feel that I couldn’t move my body. I was awake but my eyelids didn’t want to open and my body was as if it was completely numb. I could hear Nicholas and the other remaining boys joking about other girls and their bodies.

One of the boys talked about how he got a girl drunk and raped her, another talked about how all girls are sluts and we deserve being raped. I tried to move and get out of the room but my body wouldn’t let me. I became scared as I heard some of the boys telling Nicholas to undress me and show my body to them.

Luckily Nicholas didn’t give in to the demands he received. He held on to me tightly and rejected the other boy’s wishes for him to undress me and to

STAND. SPEAK. ACT. (2012). “There is no question that men’s violence against women is a serious problem in the male sports culture -- at all levels” (Katz, 2006).
rape me in front of them. They began to call him names and say “he’s not a man.” Boys and men are continually subject to having their masculinity questioned with misogynistic taunts that they are girls, ladies, wusses, female cats, female dogs, etc. and Nicholas was no exception (Digby, 2014). He picked me up and carried me out of the room, house party, and into his car. I woke up in his bed fully clothed and wrapped in a blanket. I had no idea where I was and I was scared something had happened. I saw Nicholas laying on the floor cold, so I grabbed the blanket and wrapped him up in my arms and fell back to sleep happy I wasn’t taken advantage of by someone who I now love and trust.

The Beginning of the War

With my high school diploma I decided to sign up for a college scholarship with the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC). I joined the ROTC right after high school. I was a midshipman in the midst of those who will also be some of the future leaders of our military’s fighting force.

During my time as a midshipman I often felt discouraged and discriminated against because I was a female amongst many men. I was on my college softball team but was haunted by seeing some of the baseball players of my high school. Though I didn’t know them, I remembered my experience at that party, and I knew some if not all of the guys on this team were probably still committing the same crimes. During my college days I often heard stories of women being raped on campus and how we could report such a crime.

In general, there are three locations on a college campus where a victim can officially report sexual assault: campus police, judicial affairs, or a rape crisis/counseling center. Of these, only the first two keep records on the perpetrator. However, at nearly all institutions neither campus police nor judicial affairs offices indicate whether an alleged perpetrator is a student-athlete (Crosset, Benedict, & McDonald, 1998, p.196).

I never knew that I would need to use one of these services one day, nor did I ever want to. But the college ability to spread this knowledge to all students would prove to be a valuable tool in the events to come.

During the War

Our sports teams were keen on holding parties and gatherings every weekend. I lived in an all female dorm, so I heard some of the horror stories that resulted from each party. Just like high school,
drugs and alcohol were present at these parties. My roommate was a small, petite, nice girl who was naive to sexual assault. I taught her some of the lessons that I learned in my military training at ROTC. But often it resulted in us getting off topic and talking about school, family, or work. My roommate was invited to attend one of the college parties. I wish I could have gone with her, but I had ROTC obligations that night.

Sad to say, my roommate was raped that night, and there was nothing that I could do but try to help her report the incident to the college authorities. She cried day to day after the assault and never wanted to talk about the horrific details. Another friend told me that an aggressive and persistent male took advantage of my roommate and that he didn’t want to leave her alone. He kept offering her drinks and made several attempts to kiss and grab her.
No one intervened, and no one viewed the actions of the perpetrator as wrong. Needless to say, the failure of others to step in and say something or escort my roommate home led to her rape not being stopped before the war occurred.

The homosocial culture of male sporting teams can at times encourage males to believe that it is *manly* to be stoic, play when injured, not express emotions, drink lots of beer, and be aggressive. Some sporting males can also develop beliefs that they are superior to females and better than *softer*, less-athletic males. I am, accordingly, concerned that sport can help build sexist, homophobic, and violent characters (Tarrant, 2008, p. 239).

One cannot simply blame sport culture for the rapes that occur on a college campus entirely. It is the mindset we have as individuals to allow someone to take advantage of another without saying something that should be questioned.

**After the War**

My roommate no longer attends the university she was raped at. She has transferred to an all-girl school where she feels more protected and safe. I now have a new passion to educate both males and females on the occurrences of sexual assault within the college atmosphere and in the military as well.

One government official who feels strongly about sexual assault on college campuses and in the military is Senator Kirsten Gillibrand of New York. She is a big advocate for preventing sexual assault and wants to make major changes to both college and military cultures. Senator Gillibrand serves on the United States Senate Committee on Armed Services. This is a committee that is empowered with legislative oversight of the nation’s military including the Department of Defense, military research and development, and nuclear energy (pertaining to national security) (OpenCongress.org).

I also feel strongly in leading the fight against sexual assault on college campuses and in the military. As I transition out of the ROTC and into the military, I will use the knowledge
and experiences I’ve gained to educate others on sexual assault.

In the book, *For Love of Country: Confronting Rape and Sexual Harassment in the US Military*, T. S. Nelson (2002) states that two-thirds of U.S. women soldiers say they have experienced unwanted, uninvited sexual behavior. Research from the Miles Foundation, which specializes in services to victims of violence linked to the US military, shows that 30 percent of female veterans have reported rape or attempted rape while on active duty. A U.S. Department of Defense investigation found that women of color and women who are younger, poorer, and lower in rank are “more likely to be assaulted” (cited in Dowell, 2008, p. 220).

Being a woman of color, young, poor, and lower in rank are some of the variables that make me more vulnerable to be victimized or subject to sexual assault in the military. I hope I am able to overcome these statistics and help lead a change to the invisible war.

**Conceptual Framework**

Susan’s story of her experience with sexual assault while a member of the ROTC is fictional, yet it corresponds with many truths and facts that I have gathered on the perception of sexual assault in the military as viewed by college students in the ROTC program. Capturing the perception of sexual assault within the military as perceived by ROTC students contributes something new to the field, because the views come from college students who are not yet identified with the military. They bring an outsider lens to an insider problem. My approach to this issue will open new unexplored territory. I am seeking information and knowledge of the matter not from those within the military, but from those on the way to joining the military. I believe if we educate and present the issue of sexual assault before a citizen reads the oath of office or enlistment, we can then combat sexual assault way before it impacts our service members. We will be able to fight this issue on college dorms and frat parties that ROTC members attend.

Each branch of the military has its own division of what’s called SAPR (Sexual Assault Prevention and Response). The SAPR office (SAPRO) serves as the oversight agency for all sexual assault and harassment cases within each branch of service. This military branch has to then report each occurrence or report up to the United States Department of Defense. The Department of Defense reports all
cases of sexual assault to our Congress and Commander-in-Chief. They are also responsible for implementing new training regiments and ways to get rid of or improve sexual assault within the military.

Women constitute 13 percent of the U.S. military but [only] 21 percent of Department of Defense discharges (Stiehm, 1996). The Sexual Assault Prevention Office in the military has taken up the question of sexual assault as it occurs in civic life and within the military, but there has been little work that looks at sexual assault from the perception of ROTC students. I believe that sexual violence can’t be resolved without first eradicating the norms of hegemonic masculinity, which in my own words, means males dominating over all other genders in our society. Data from a year-long case study of Men Against Violence, a peer education organization at a large university in the South, demonstrates the feasibility of meaningfully expanding male students' conceptions of manhood and appropriate gender roles and, thus, reducing the likelihood of men engaging in sexually or physically violent behavior (Hong, 2000). If the issue of violence and sexual assault can be eliminated on campuses and in our training environments, then why does it exist? As stated by Doctor LouLou Hong (2000), we have to eliminate the gender roles that exist in our society which is the hegemonic masculinity that exists today. This dominance, or drive for it, continues to hurt women and we need to identify ways to stop it.

We know that sexual assault happens to both men and women, but it is a proven fact that it happens more to women regardless of race and class (United States Department of Defense [U.S. DoD SAPRO], 2015). This doesn’t mean men are the only ones who should receive the training or extensive training. But it does mean we must identify methods for relating this sexual assault information to men.

How do women negotiate gender identities within the “masculine” military institution, and what types of transformations in their gender ideology and practices does this negotiation entail? I find that ROTC women's transformative agency is limited by the cultural imperative of performing gender. That is, because their very identities as women are called into question in the military sphere, ROTC women must privilege traditionally feminine aspects of themselves in order to maintain a coherent sense of self. Through this process, these women...
ultimately reproduce traditional femininity and male privilege (Silva, 2008, p. 937).

We have to research and discover new ideas of how to have the knowledge of sexual assault permeated into the men within our military. My research is one step to achieving this goal because interviewing the young men who are joining the service and giving them the knowledge and resources on sexual assault will give them the opportunity to fight against sexual assault. We already conduct training annually for ROTC students as well as within the military, but I want to ask the interviewees how can we improve that training and make it relatable to everyday livelihood.

We know that men view other men in two ways: weak or strong (Katz, 2006). This notion gives the implication that if we question another man’s being then we are not men ourselves. When a man’s sexuality comes into play, he is called a homosexual, or in others terms, “gay”. This sexual marking as it exists in heteropatriarchy inverts masculinity into a space of weakness. Why does this occur, and why does our society allow it?

Male-peer-culture has historically kept men silent. It is wimpy to confront other men’s sexism. It is wimpy to question men’s enjoyment of women as sex objects. Men who treat women with dignity and respect cannot be real men (Katz, 2006, p. 209).

We already know it is men who criticize other men when it comes to women’s fair treatment. We can assume that a majority of the sexual assault occurrences could have been alleviated if another man stepped in and did not worry about his masculinity being questioned. In other words, we have to get more men to speak up against violence and sexual assault against women. My interviews with young men and women in the ROTC programs illuminate this problem. We have to eliminate the idea of men having total control of women first within our society before we can do so within the military.

The ROTC students that I interviewed all have different backgrounds and experiences. So far, some have voiced that they understand the issue of sexual assault within the military, but many have voiced that it is a bystander issue that needs to be addressed. Katz (2006) expands on this:

In the field of gender-violence prevention, the idea of working with bystanders has gathered considerable momentum over the past decade. In
In this educational context, a bystander refers to someone who is not directly involved as a friend or family member. A bystander can also be a member of a group, team, workplace, or any other social unit (p. 116).

Already the interviewees understand that the issue of sexual assault begins with those who are around or may know the perpetrators. It also begins with those who observe the signs and signals of a perpetrator but fail to act on their instincts. My interviews shed light on ways to educate ROTC students on how to identify these signals. It could be from how a person addresses someone to how aggressive a man is in trying to force a woman to leave a public space with him. Again, we know that sexual assault doesn’t just happen to women, but we should better educate men because women are more frequently victims of male sexual assault (U.S. DoD SAPRO, 2015). Focusing education and prevention on men can better facilitate women’s prevention and how a woman should fight back against male dominance.

One feminist research term that is relatable to my interviews is “standpoint epistemology” (Maynard 2004). Standpoint theory argues that those who have experienced or who are impacted by a researched phenomenon such as violence provide an important source of knowledge. I use a standpoint approach because I want to focus on individuals who have experienced or witnessed sexual assault so that they can describe their own thoughts and experiences around this phenomenon. I have to remember that just because an individual may not have witnessed or experienced sexual assault does not mean they do not have the knowledge that I am seeking on the matter. Standpoint epistemology tells us that we have to be courteous to those we are talking to so that we have access to the knowledge that we seek.

Standpoint epistemology developed from feminist criticisms regarding women’s absence from, or marginalized position in, social science. Although social science was supposedly objective and value free, feminists argued that it was conducted largely from male perspectives and male interests. In order to make the meaning of women's lives more visible, it was necessary to analyze it from their point of view (Maynard, 2004, p. 962).

A standpoint approach allows me to be more unbiased towards those I interview, in the hope that this will help maintain an open dialogue with my research data. My interviews with women are important because sexual
assault in the military, in a large amount, happens to women. It’s less common that men report themselves as victims of rape. While the stigma and victim blaming around sexual violence make it hard for all victims to report a crime, it is even more challenging for men to come forward, because doing so threatens their masculinity and dominance (Katz, 2006). Even with this, the fact that women suffer greatly by sexual assault in and out of the military proves that women are important sources of knowledge.

Research Methods

I chose to study ROTC students at the University of Rochester where I am a part of the NROTC unit. I have been a student here for the past two years and I play an integral role as a leader among the ROTC students in my group. I use interviewing as my primary method because it allows me to have one-on-one face time with each student where I can dialogue and listen with an unbiased approach. I conducted my interviews in a secluded but open environment where my participants felt comfortable. My participants did not have to wear their uniforms so the atmosphere changed from a controlled and dominate environment to one more laid back and friendly. When conducting my interviews, I encouraged the ROTC students to speak freely and I made sure I allowed them opportunities to process emotional reactions to the topic. I audiotaped each interview so that I could maintain eye contact with the student being interviewed. This allowed me more time to listen to what each respondent had to say and develop a keen relationship with each participant.

Preliminary Findings

My research shows that not everyone views sexual assault as a major issue. The man that I have interviewed did not know of its trending occurrences in the military, and felt it was just training and had no idea how widespread it is amongst the branches of service. “I have never actually witnessed a sexual assault, or know of someone who was directly involved with a case” (Male interviewee #3). The females spoke of occurrences that are more commonly known, and it was astonishing to hear that a male did not have much knowledge of sexual assault occurring. It became bothersome as the interviews were concluded because the issue was being identified before I even started typing this paper. More and more men are not focusing on sexual assault as women do. Women have the fear of
being victimized while men sit back and worry about other issues. Women are also more likely to learn about sexual assault from the women who have experienced it occurring. A woman will feel more comfortable talking to another woman who will be able to identify what has happened and relate to her fears of being a woman. Some of the challenges that I will encounter in the future are how to make this issue relatable to men? And, as a man, how to identify myself as someone who will listen to this issue and help?

One of the female interviewees told of a story that was rare but not unheard of, and she spoke of an issue within our culture that may be one of the leading factors to sexual assault:

An officer on a ship that I was reporting to had cameras placed in her stateroom. The cameras were angled so that only the neck down was visible and had been there for many months. A male sailor had placed them there to watch her change and was only caught when the officer changed to another ship and someone else cleaning the stateroom found the cameras. The sailor was discharged from the Navy. How would I prevent this from occurring in the future? I think the person who placed the camera was probably exhibiting signs of unusual sexual behavior, for example, maybe a habit of watching/reading pornography. Undoubtedly, one of his buddies must have caught onto his habits but didn’t do anything about them. As a future division officer, it would be my job to encourage those in my division to have a zero tolerance to such sexual behavior, but also foster a climate where individuals can be approached and the problem resolved. (Female interviewee #1)

Knowing she was able to identify what some of the causes were within this form of sexual harassment gave me the sense that I am on the right track to identifying how to resolve this issue. This could be avoided only if someone with her knowledge was in charge and willing to talk about it to all within his or her command.

While conducting my interviews, I found the female participants had more experiential knowledge than the males. One of the female interviewees describes her experience with sexual assault and how she would mitigate this issue:

I encountered a case this year (post-event), in which a close friend had been drinking at a party and was no longer completely sober, and a male was being very forward with her. They had just met, yet he followed her around and even waited for her to come out of the bathroom before slyly
leading her away somewhere secluded. She was sexually assaulted yet nonetheless felt extremely guilty afterward because she was sober enough to know what had happened, although she clearly could not have gotten out of the situation the male had forced her into. Such cases are not uncommon where the victim is intoxicated to the point of not being able to fight back, and can be prevented by encouraging more safe drinking environments with friends instead of strangers. I would also encourage a policy of always having a sober buddy who doesn't drink that night for every member who does choose to drink. I would also discourage underage drinking overall, since it seems younger college students get taken advantage of more than older students, who may make wiser choices in planning ahead to set themselves up for success.” (Female Interviewee #2)

The two women I interviewed are aware of sexual assault and have experiential knowledge that will help in the future. Some have received training outside of the ROTC unit from family and friends, and others none at all. But with all the females that were interviewed, they all believe that men, as bystanders, need to speak up more and say something. So creating a bystander approach course of training can help in the future to combat sexual assault within the military.

Epilogue

My overall goal is to identify how to rid or minimize sexual assault within the military. Though this is a major feat that cannot be achieved within a semester of college, I believe this will put me on the right path. My research confirms that men lack knowledge about or experience with sexual assault prevention so training may not be enough. Maybe they are experiencing sexual assault, but because it’s so common, they’re unaware of what is actually happening right before their eyes. For example, a male following a female around ordering her drinks so he can get her alone would seem normal to these young men. But in fact, it’s planned sexual assault because the female will not be able to consent once heavily intoxicated. The female interviewees were able to quickly identify ways around this issue but the men were not.

My results are important because they come from an outer source. They are the experiential knowledge that the ROTC students have or witnessed. We need to know how ROTC students perceive sexual assault within the military because they are the ones who
are volunteering to enter the military. Their views or beliefs on this topic may already be influenced by personal and social constructions. These beliefs are carried into the military and will allow or disallow this issue to continue depending on how each member feels. That those I interviewed were unaware of the seriousness sexual assault plays within our military shows that new training tools and techniques are needed.

To increase the readiness and training for sexual assault within the military, I would propose a real life scenario to be acted out during sexual assault training. My fictional narrative of Susan is an example of this approach. These modern day paradigms can become an open and honest discussion that involves both males and females to identify as a whole how to mitigate sexual assault. For now, my research will help readers better understand the seriousness of sexual assault and provide the knowledge needed to make a report as well as understand how to help someone faced with this situation.

References


Title IX:
What Students Think They Know

Students often hold a misconception or are completely uninformed as to what is Title IX. Currently, under Title IX, all students have the right to receive an education in an environment free from sex discrimination. Furthermore, it is the responsibility of the institution to take the necessary measures to comply with any student who chooses to file a report of gender discrimination. Title IX was implemented as a memorandum to promote gender equality, but over the years it has developed into not only a law but also an important piece of educational rights and standards. It is important to assess gender discrimination in relation to Title IX, because equality is the basis for this law.

Each October, Chipotle, the chain southwestern burrito restaurant, offers a holiday special: come to any location dressed in a costume and receive a $3 burrito. My friends and I, broke college students at the time, quickly began coordinating lunch plans to take advantage of this unbeatable offer. However, of all the members in the group who were free at noon that day, I was not one of them. I remember sitting with my friends and politely declining the lunch date invitation and explaining how I interned until 2:00 p.m. that day. My friend then asked me where I interned, and I simply replied, “Oh. Title IX, on-campus.” My friend Erica then asked me the question that launched this research. Her head tilted to one side, Erica looked at me and said “What’s that? Like, parking services?”
Parking.
Services.
My close friend, who I had considered a well-educated and keen woman, had just asked me a question that left me speechless and dumbfounded. My college-aged friend had absolutely no knowledge on Title IX and even thought it was transportation related. Our small exchange, and my discovery that many like Erica lack knowledge about Title IX, became a catalyst for this project. This paper is a brief overview of Title IX with discussion of its purpose and intent as part of a liberal feminist agenda.

**History of Title IX**

On June 23, 1972, the United States Congress enacted Title IX, a portion of the United States Education Amendment of 1972 (Appendix A). Essentially, under Title IX all students have the right to receive an education in an environment free from sex and gender discrimination. Title IX was implemented to promote gender equality, and over the years it has developed into an important law contributing to educational rights and standards. “Victims of sexual assault are more likely to suffer academically and from depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, to abuse alcohol and drugs, and to contemplate suicide” (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2011, para. 4). This notion that victims of sexual violence suffer academically due to the trauma of rape and other malicious sexual acts is concerning. The policies under Title IX ensure student victims of sexual harassment and/or assault can continue their education at a school and feel safe, protected, and heard.

In 2011 the United States Department of Education and Office for Civil Rights issued a “Dear Colleague letter.” This letter states that Title IX must and will be used as a law to combat and handle sexual violence within educational institutions. The Letter states that sexual violence is an umbrella term that includes rape, sexual battery, sexual assault, and sexual coercion. As many institutions, especially within higher education, begin to comply with Title IX’s statutes, an emergence of high standards and codes are being put into place to ensure best practices. Furthermore, it is the responsibility of the institution to take the necessary measures to work with any student who chooses to file a report of gender discrimination.

The College at Brockport, State University of New York (SUNY), has added an entire section to its Code of

Dissenting Voices, v. 4, issue 1, Spring 2015 88
Student Conduct (CSC) that pertains to Sexual Misconduct in relation to Title IX. Additionally, The College at Brockport’s Title IX Compliance Program is a campus effort which brings in several departments and resources on campus that provide education, prevention, and response to sexual violence. Some of the cases that come under Title IX campus compliance are important to note.

Lisa Simpson, et al. v. University of Colorado

It was a typical December evening in 2001 for Lisa Simpson, an undergraduate at the University of Colorado. She and several friends had been drinking in her off-campus apartment when several of the members of the University’s football team had arrived. The players brought with them recruits, high school aged men that were prospective students of the University. Many of these men were intoxicated. Lisa Simpson shortly after retreated to her bedroom to go to sleep however, later that night she woke up to two recruits removing her clothing. Lisa reported that she was sexually assaulted by numerous recruits and football players and also recalls seeing a fellow friend of hers in the room being assaulted. The following morning, Lisa Simpson went to the local hospital, reported the incident to authorities, and two days later received a rape kit examination (Kearl, 2005). Her roommate reported the incident to the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs and the director of the university’s Office of Victim’s Assistance. The University charged several players with code of conduct violations, but they never removed the students from the team or the institution. Furthermore, the football coach continued recruiting an alleged assailant (Kearl, 2005). In February 2004, Lisa Simpson dropped out of college (Kearl).

Title IX, Simpson, and Colorado

The first task in Title IX compliance is education and outreach. The institution is responsible for coordinating training seminars, teaching staff and faculty how to respond to reports of gender discrimination and also enable them with skills on how to respond to a situation. Training officials on how to identify and respond to a complaint is the foremost action. Secondly, Kearl (2005) points out that schools must respond in a prompt manner upon receiving a complaint that falls under Title IX. An investigation must begin no later than sixty calendar days after a complaint has been filed.
Schools that delay investigations are in direct violation of Title IX. It is an extreme violation of Title IX for any school to retaliate against a victim. Victims must be offered the option to report to the police. Additionally, the Know Your IX website states that a hearing through the school “…must determine whether a complaint of sex discrimination is ‘more likely than not’ to have occurred or 51% likely to have occurred” (para 16, 2015). This standard applies for all complaints of sex discrimination. Lastly, an annual publishing of a campus security act with descriptions of all crimes committed on or around the campus is a piece of Title IX compliance.

The Central Baptist College website states that “The Clery Act, originally known as the Campus Security Act, the Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics Act (20 USC § 1092(f)), is the landmark federal law that requires colleges and universities across the United States to disclose information about crime on and around their campuses” (n.d.). Some specific actions the Clery Act mandates is the creation of a public crime log, disclosure of crime statistics for incidents that occur on or around campus, and implementation of an emergency response, notification, and testing policy. Each sexual assault or harassment case, whether pending or closed, is reported annually. More so, Kearl (2011) tells that Simpson also argued during her trial that she learned of several collegian women who reported to Colorado officials that they were sexually assaulted by football players and recruits but never had their reports investigated. She argued that the University of Colorado fostered a sexually hostile environment. Both the Chancellor of Student Affairs and Office of Victim’s Assistance were notified by her roommate that December of 2001, but the University took no action to assist Lisa Simpson in remedying her tragic situation, and this subsequently led to Simpson leaving higher education all together. In 2007, the University of Colorado at Boulder agreed to a $2.5 million settlement (Kearl, 2005).

**Title IX and Women and Gender Studies**

Liberal feminism seeks to assimilate women into social institutions by implementing equal opportunity through legal and social reforms (Tong, 1989). Society upholds the principles of democracy and creates a fair playing ground on which both sexes can excel.
Title IX can be labeled as a liberal feminist action because it combines women, equal opportunity, and the institution. Many first wave feminists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucy Stone fought for legal rights and governmental practices to advance women’s rights. Much like liberal feminism, Title IX contributes to women’s equality by creating memorandums and processes that will help facilitate sexual violence sanctions within educational institutions. As informed by liberal feminism, Title IX legislation is rooted in legal reform as a measure to ensure women’s equality.

Women like Stanton and Stone fought for suffrage and women’s rights during the late 19th century. They demanded that women be included in legal affairs, social equality, and be granted the right to vote. Stanton, the lead author of Declaration of Sentiments, signed in 1848, included a list of sixteen sentiments which highlight main areas of women’s oppression (Appendix B). One hundred attendees, including 32 men, signed this document at the first Women’s Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York. This document created over a century ago was a statement against the patriarchal system and called for equality among sexes in America. However, more than a century has passed since The Declaration of Sentiments was authored and many of the sentiments have still not been realized. Specifically, in relation to Title IX, listed below are two of the sixteen Sentiments which we can see are still relevant to Title IX workings today:

He has created a false public sentiment by giving to the world a different code of morals for men and women, by which moral delinquencies which exclude women from society, are not only tolerated but deemed of little account in man…

He has endeavored, in every way that he could to destroy her confidence in her own powers, to lessen her self-respect, and to make her willing to lead a dependent and abject life. (Appendix B).

This is where the liberal feminist paradox of Title IX comes into play. Liberal feminists of the 1800s fought for gender equality within institutions and this has been a long ongoing battle since. Even the liberal feminists of today are fighting to eliminate gender discrimination from our educational institutions. Women like Gloria Steinem or Naomi Wolf use their voices to create social reform. But yet, it seems as though the war against the establishment on achieving sex and even gender equality is a centuries old
one. Since the inception of the women’s right to vote, liberal feminism has achieved many successes. Single women now have property rights, marriage equality laws allow same sex couples to marry, and women are able to join the military. However, there is still much more room for improvement and a lot more work to be done by liberal feminists. The work toward gender equality in terms of policies and laws has been merely band aids for the issue. We have been working toward this for almost two centuries now, but how much progress has been made? It is 2015 and yet the Sentiments that Stanton drafted in 1848 still have a contemporary relevance. It makes one wonder what Stanton and the other 99 attendees of the Seneca Falls Convention would say today about the state of gender equality and the need for Title IX.

**Personal Interest**

In fall 2014 I was given the opportunity to intern under Dr. Karen Logsdon, the College at Brockport Title IX Deputy Coordinator for students. It was during my time at the Title IX Compliance Program that I realized that my friends and fellow classmates knew little about my internship, and that they had very little knowledge of what Title IX is. Even my Women and Gender Studies classmates were minimally informed. I found during my interactions with friends and peers that they believed Title IX was about cheerleading, women’s athletics, or parking services. So in my Feminist Research Methods course, I set out to discover where the knowledge of Title IX, specifically on The College at Brockport campus, is coming from and why students are uninformed. I believe educational outreach is the most important piece to Title IX. To study and explore the level of knowledge students currently have on Title IX and where they are receiving this information is essential to improving Title IX programming and outreach. Ultimately, this could specifically help The College at Brockport increase student understanding of their rights and responsibilities concerning sexual discrimination in education. Campus circumstances around Title IX and sexual assault education efforts also inform my research.

Brockport, he spoke to over 1,000 students about bystander violence intervention. Roughly two-thirds of the attendees at the lecture were athletes who were mandated to attend as part of the athletic department requirement. Many students attending the lecture assaulted Katz with harsh words and insults such as ”no one cares” or “shut up”. Students broadcasted offensive rape and sexual assault comments over Yik Yak, an anonymous social media application. Many who attended and witnessed the attitudes of students at the Jackson Katz lecture felt assaulted by the crowd. The Jackson Katz lecture confirms that rape culture, defined as societal thinking where sexual violence is normalized or excused, at Brockport still runs deep. The “Jackson Katz lecture fiasco” as I like to call it, is the perfect example of why Title IX education needs to be improved upon at The College at Brockport.

Universities

The media hold significant influences in developing the opinion of the public. The same is true in developing attitudes towards Title IX. While researching, I found that the majority of newspaper editorials and opinion articles published regarding Title IX usually address sports or athletic related concerns. Up until about 2011, Title IX was interpreted as an athletic based memorandum. So Title IX being about more than just sports is a relatively new concept. Only four or five years ago Title IX transcended athletics to also cover sexual violence. I observed in conversation with peers regarding Title IX that they felt that it was a piece of legislation focusing on sports and women rather than on gender discrimination. I found this very interesting, particularly since my personal experience within the Title IX offices showed administrators making powerful and revolutionary policy toward achieving gender equality in higher education.

Recent data shows nearly 4,000 reported incidents of sexual battery and over 800 reported rapes occurring in our nation’s public high schools (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2011, para. 2) and acts of sexual violence are vastly under-reported (Karjane, Fisher, & Cullen, 2005.) This data tells us that within our educational systems, many victims remain silent. Many institutions that close their door on reports of sexual violence perpetrated against a student do so due to fear of bad press or fear of tarnishing a school’s reputation. Title IX policy reporting mandates aim to
counteract institutional cover-ups so victims of assault are protected. Outsiders can see through when a college or university is exposed for mishandlings of discrimination cases. In fact, the bad press surrounding a mishandling of a reported case of sexual assault is far worse than if the institution had handled a reported conflict appropriately. Fortunately, Title IX protects victims of sexual assault, and one goal is to restore the victim’s safety and security and encourage them so that they can continue seeking their education. Title IX encourages more victims of sexual assault and harassment to come forward than ever before since the legislation allows the victim to report privately and free from perceived threats to exposure.

Not all victims of sexual assault are as overt and adamant on making a statement on their experience as Emma Sulkowicz, the Columbia University student who began the “Carry That Weight” campaign. Carry That Weight began in April 2013 as Sulkowicz’ senior performance art project, sparked from her experience as a rape survivor. According to the Carry That Weight” (n.d.) website:

[Sulkowicz] reported a male student for raping her to the college administration... After a protracted, demeaning, and grossly mishandled process which concluded in the university finding the male student she reported for rape "not responsible," Emma began a performance art piece titled Mattress Performance: Carry That Weight. The project entails that she is carrying a standard issue dorm mattress with her everywhere that she goes on campus as a symbol of the weight she carries as a rape survivor.

What started as a project at one university has grown into a statement and campaign across college campuses everywhere. Carry That Weight advocates and encourage victims of sexual assault to make silent statements by carrying a mattress or pillow with them all day, using April 13th of each year to mark this event (Carry The Weight Together, 2013). While the campaign has brought greater awareness about voices of victims of sexual assault, it is important to remember the many victims still have not come forward.

Emma Sulkwicz and Lisa Simpson have similar experiences and stories of being sexually assaulted while in college, reporting to administration and having no justice imposed for them. Not only did the universities fail them, but the policies set in place to help them failed as well. These two women are two examples of many who have also been
failed by the system. In May 2015, The Department of Education released the names of 55 colleges around the country that are being investigated for not following Title IX rules and investigation procedures.

**Going Forward**

It is critical that we – college administrators, faculty, and students – don’t use Title IX as a safety net. Similarly, we must not turn a blind eye to issues such as dating violence or sexual harassment in hopes that administrators will delegate professionals to deal with and handle these situations and cases. We also must remember that no matter what legislation is passed, there will still be victims. We must continue to place large emphasis on prevention education and continue working to end rape culture.

Liberal feminism and its ideas to change the existing system is a hard battle to fight, especially when that system is working within patriarchal codes. To go forward, Title IX needs to continue to end gender oppression and ensure women remain in school and receive education. We as a human race must end sexual violence and rape culture. We as liberal feminists must persevere in the fight toward women’s rights. We as individuals need to carry the message that gender discrimination is unacceptable and take the responsibility of reporting any instances of such behavior.

**References**

**CARRY THAT WEIGHT.** (n.d.). *Why a mattress or a pillow? And who is Emma Sulkowicz?* Retrieved from http://www.carryingtheweighttogether.com/why_a_mattress_or_a_pillow_and_who_is_emma_sulkowicz


Appendix A

Title IX, Education Amendments of 1972
(Title 20 U.S.C. Sections 1681-1688)
Section 1681. Sex

(a) Prohibition against discrimination; exceptions. No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance, except that:

(1) Classes of educational institutions subject to prohibition
in regard to admissions to educational institutions, this section shall apply only to institutions of vocational education, professional education, and graduate higher education, and to public institutions of undergraduate higher education;

(2) Educational institutions commencing planned change in admissions
in regard to admissions to educational institutions, this section shall not apply (A) for one year from June 23, 1972, nor for six years after June 23, 1972, in the case of an educational institution which has begun the process of changing from being an institution which admits only students of one sex to being an institution which admits students of both sexes, but only if it is carrying out a plan for such a change which is approved by the Secretary of Education or (B) for seven years from the date an educational institution begins the process of changing from being an institution which admits only students of one sex to being an institution which admits students of both sexes, but only if it is carrying out a plan for such a change which is approved by the Secretary of Education, whichever is the later;

(3) Educational institutions of religious organizations with contrary religious tenets
this section shall not apply to any educational institution which is controlled by a religious organization if the application of this subsection would not be consistent with the religious tenets of such organization;

(4) Educational institutions training individuals for military services or merchant marine
this section shall not apply to an educational institution whose primary purpose is the training of individuals for the military services of the United States, or the merchant marine;

(5) Public educational institutions with traditional and continuing admissions policy
in regard to admissions this section shall not apply to any public institution of undergraduate higher education which is an institution that traditionally and continually from its establishment has had a policy of admitting only students of one sex;

(6) Social fraternities or sororities; voluntary youth service organizations
this section shall not apply to membership practices --
(A) of a social fraternity or social sorority which is exempt from taxation under section 501(a) of Title 26, the active membership of which consists primarily of students in attendance at an institution of higher education, or

(B) of the Young Men's Christian Association, Young Women's Christian Association; Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, Camp Fire Girls, and voluntary youth service organizations which are so exempt, the membership of which has traditionally been limited to persons of one sex and principally to persons of less than nineteen years of age;

(7) Boy or Girl conferences
this section shall not apply to--

(A) any program or activity of the American Legion undertaken in connection with the organization or operation of any Boys State conference, Boys Nation conference, Girls State conference, or Girls Nation conference; or

(B) any program or activity of any secondary school or educational institution specifically for--

(i) the promotion of any Boys State conference, Boys Nation conference, Girls State conference, or Girls Nation conference; or

(ii) the selection of students to attend any such conference;

(8) Father-son or mother-daughter activities at educational institutions
this section shall not preclude father-son or mother-daughter activities at an educational institution, but if such activities are provided for students of one sex, opportunities for reasonably comparable activities shall be provided for students of the other sex; and

(9) Institutions of higher education scholarship awards in "beauty" pageants
this section shall not apply with respect to any scholarship or other financial assistance awarded by an institution of higher education to any individual because such individual has received such award in any pageant in which the attainment of such award is based upon a combination of factors related to the personal appearance, poise, and talent of such individual and in which participation is limited to individuals of one sex only, so long as such pageant is in compliance with other nondiscrimination provisions of Federal law.

(b) Preferential or disparate treatment because of imbalance in participation or receipt of Federal benefits; statistical evidence of imbalance.

Nothing contained in subsection (a) of this section shall be interpreted to require any educational institution to grant preferential or disparate treatment to the members of one sex on account of an imbalance which may exist with respect to the total number or percentage of persons of that sex participating in or receiving the benefits of any federally supported program or activity, in comparison with the total number or percentage of persons of that sex in any community, State, section, or other area: Provided, that this subsection shall not be construed to prevent the consideration in any hearing or proceeding under this chapter of statistical evidence
tending to show that such an imbalance exists with respect to the participation in, or receipt of the benefits of, any such program or activity by the members of one sex.

(c) Educational institution defined.

For the purposes of this chapter an educational institution means any public or private preschool, elementary, or secondary school, or any institution of vocational, professional, or higher education, except that in the case of an educational institution composed of more than one school, college, or department which are administratively separate units, such term means each such school, college or department.

Section 1682. Federal administrative enforcement; report to Congressional committees

Each Federal department and agency which is empowered to extend Federal financial assistance to any education program or activity, by way of grant, loan, or contract other than a contract of insurance or guaranty, is authorized and directed to effectuate the provisions of section 1681 of this title with respect to such program or activity by issuing rules, regulations, or orders of general applicability which shall be consistent with achievement of the objectives of the statute authorizing the financial assistance in connection with which the action is taken. No such rule, regulation, or order shall become effective unless and until approved by the President.

Compliance with any requirement adopted pursuant to this section may be effected (l) by the termination of or refusal to grant or to continue assistance under such program or activity to any recipient as to whom there has been an express finding on the record, after opportunity for hearing, of a failure to comply with such requirement, but such termination or refusal shall be limited to the particular political entity, or part thereof, or other recipient as to whom such a finding has been made, and shall be limited in its effect to the particular program, or part thereof, in which such noncompliance has been so found, or (2) by any other means authorized by law: Provided, however, that no such action shall be taken until the department or agency concerned has advised the appropriate person or persons of the failure to comply with the requirement and has determined that compliance cannot be secured by voluntary means. In the case of any action terminating, or refusing to grant or continue, assistance because of failure to comply with a requirement imposed pursuant to this section, the head of the Federal department or agency shall file with the committees of the House and Senate having legislative jurisdiction over the program or activity involved a full written report of the circumstances and the grounds for such action. No such action shall become effective until thirty days have elapsed after the filing of such report.

Section 1683. Judicial Review

Any department or agency action taken pursuant to section 1682 of this title shall be subject to such judicial review as may otherwise be provided by law for similar action taken by such department or agency on other grounds. In the case of action, not otherwise subject to judicial review, terminating or refusing to grant or to continue financial assistance upon a finding of failure to comply with any requirement imposed pursuant to section 1682 of this title, any person aggrieved (including any State or political subdivision thereof and any agency of either) may obtain judicial review of such action in accordance with chapter 7 of title 5, United States
Code, and such action shall not be deemed committed to unreviewable agency discretion within the meaning of section 701 of that title.

Section 1684. Blindness or visual impairment; prohibition against discrimination
No person in the United States shall, on the ground of blindness or severely impaired vision, be denied admission in any course of study by a recipient of Federal financial assistance for any education program or activity; but nothing herein shall be construed to require any such institution to provide any special services to such person because of his blindness or visual impairment.

Section 1685. Authority under other laws unaffected
Nothing in this chapter shall add to or detract from any existing authority with respect to any program or activity under which Federal financial assistance is extended by way of a contract of insurance or guaranty.

Section 1686. Interpretation with respect to living facilities
Notwithstanding anything to the contrary contained in this chapter, nothing contained herein shall be construed to prohibit any educational institution receiving funds under this Act, from maintaining separate living facilities for the different sexes.

Section 1687. Interpretation of "program or activity"
For the purposes of this title, the term "program or activity" and "program" mean all of the operations of --

(I)(A) a department, agency, special purpose district, or other instrumentality of a State or of a local government; or

(B) the entity of such State or local government that distributed such assistance and each such department or agency (and each other State or local government entity) to which the assistance is extended, in the case of assistance to a State or local government;

(2)(A) a college, university, or other postsecondary institution, or a public system of higher education; or

(B) a local educational agency (as defined in section 2854(a)(10) of this title, system of vocational education, or other school system;

(3)(A) an entire corporation, partnership, or other private organization, or an entire sole proprietorship --

(i) if assistance is extended to such corporation, partnership, private organization, or sole proprietorship as a whole; or

(ii) which is principally engaged in the business of providing education, health care, housing, social services, or parks and recreation; or

(B) the entire plant or other comparable, geographically separate facility to which Federal financial assistance is extended, in the case of any other corporation, partnership, private organization, or sole proprietorship; or
(4) any other entity which is established by two or more of the entities described in paragraph (1), (2) or (3);
any part of which is extended Federal financial assistance, except that such term does not include any operation of an entity which is controlled by a religious organization if the application of section 1681 if this title to such operation would not be consistent with the religious tenets of such organization.
Appendix B
Declaration of Sentiments
Stanton, Elizabeth Cady (1848) cited in Smith (2003).

1. When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one portion of the family of man to assume among the people of the earth a position different from that which they have hitherto occupied, but one to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes that impel them to such a course.

2. We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights governments are instituted, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. Whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of those who suffer from it to refuse allegiance to it, and to insist upon the institution of a new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to affect their safety and happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shown that mankind are more disposed to suffer while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their duty to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security. Such has been the patient sufferance of the women under this government, and such is now the necessity which constrains them to demand the equal station to which they are entitled.

3. The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world.

4. He has never permitted her to exercise her inalienable right to the elective franchise.

5. He has compelled her to submit to laws, in the formation of which she had no voice.

6. He has withheld from her rights which are given to the most ignorant and degraded men--both natives and foreigners.

7. Having deprived her of this first right of a citizen, the elective franchise, thereby leaving her without representation in the halls of legislation, he has oppressed her on all sides.

8. He has made her, if married, in the eye of the law, civilly dead.

9. He has taken from her all rights of property, even to the wages she earns.
10. He has made her, morally, an irresponsible being, as she can commit many crimes with impunity, provided they be done in the presence of her husband. In the covenant of marriage, she is compelled to promise obedience to her husband, he becoming, to all intents and purposes, her master—the law giving him power to deprive her of her liberty, and to administer chastisement.

11. He has so framed the laws of divorce, as to what shall be the proper causes, and in case of separation, to whom the guardianship of the children shall be given, as to be wholly regardless of the happiness of women—the law, in all cases, going upon a false supposition of the supremacy of man, and giving all power into his hands.

12. After depriving her of all rights as a married woman, if single, and the owner of property, he has taxed her to support a government which recognizes her only when her property can be made profitable to it.

13. He has monopolized nearly all the profitable employments, and from those she is permitted to follow, she receives but a scanty remuneration. He closes against her all the avenues to wealth and distinction which he considers most honorable to himself. As a teacher of theology, medicine, or law, she is not known.

14. He has denied her the facilities for obtaining a thorough education, all colleges being closed against her.

15. He allows her in church, as well as state, but a subordinate position, claiming apostolic authority for her exclusion from the ministry, and, with some exceptions, from any public participation in the affairs of the church.

16. He has created a false public sentiment by giving to the world a different code of morals for men and women, by which moral delinquencies which exclude women from society, are not only tolerated, but deemed of little account in man.

17. He has usurped the prerogative of Jehovah himself, claiming it as his right to assign for her a sphere of action, when that belongs to her conscience and to her God.

18. He has endeavored, in every way that he could, to destroy her confidence in her own powers, to lessen her self-respect, and to make her willing to lead a dependent and abject life.

19. Now, in view of this entire disfranchisement of one-half the people of this country, their social and religious degradation—in view of the unjust laws above mentioned, and because women do feel themselves aggrieved, oppressed, and fraudulently deprived of their most sacred rights, we insist that they have immediate admission to all the rights and privileges which belong to them as citizens of the United States.

20. In entering upon the great work before us, we anticipate no small amount of misconception, misrepresentation, and ridicule; but we shall use every instrumentality within our power to effect our object. We shall employ agents, circulate tracts, petition
the State and National legislatures, and endeavor to enlist the pulpit and the press in our behalf. We hope this Convention will be followed by a series of Conventions embracing every part of the country.
In this paper, I explore a complex, perplexing, and somewhat disturbing subculture that exists on the social media platform, Instagram. Within this subculture, adolescent girls share photos which depict and in many ways promote eating disorders and self-harm. By analyzing the images themselves as well as identifying patterns in identity of the profiles that host these images, I raise several questions which require further discussion. First, who is sharing these images? Why are they being shared? What can be done to help the girls suffering from these serious psychological issues? And finally, what is happening in our culture and in our world to push young girls to these extreme behaviors? Discussion and analysis of these topics is not easy, but it is necessary if we as a society hope to protect girls from experiencing such troublesome and worrying adolescent years; it is crucial if we hope to create a society full of strong, psychologically healthy women. With this essay, I use my voice to dissent against a culture that damns girls and young women to lives plagued by years of self-hatred, hurt, and sadness.

Note to readers: This photo essay contains graphic images which depict emaciated bodies, promotions of eating disorders, and self-harm including cuts and blood. If you feel that you may be triggered or made upset by these images, you may choose not to continue reading.

If you or someone you know is currently struggling with these issues, help is available. See Appendix A for some suggested resources.
Introduction

Feminist scholars have long been interested in the challenges that young girls face growing up in a patriarchal society. In fact, an entire field, Girl Studies, has developed as research on the lives of girls has accumulated. In 1994, Mary Pipher wrote a book titled Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls. In this book, readers are presented with stories from adolescent girls who Pipher encountered in her career as a clinical psychologist. A prominent issue discussed throughout this particular work is the increasing rates of depression and eating disorders among young girls in America. Though Pipher was certainly not the first to discuss this phenomenon, her book became a prominent one among feminist circles, especially among those interested in studying the lives of girls. Now eleven years later, the very serious issues discussed in this book and others like it remain prominent in the lives of young women, but the stories are often being told in a different way.

In modern Western culture, social media outlets are a force to be reckoned with. In small towns and populous cities alike, one would be hard-pressed to go an entire day without seeing a Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, or Instagram symbol on anything from a cup of coffee to a car insurance advertisement. Social media has invaded the American lifestyle, and virtually no one is immune. This invasion may be particularly pronounced among teen and pre-teen girls, however. One popular social media platform called Instagram functions almost exclusively through a mobile app for one’s smart phone or tablet. It allows users to share images with their “followers” and to build a network of friends. According to Instagram’s website, since their launch in 2010 they now host 300 million active members and over 30 billion photos (Instagram, 2015c). Alongside everyday Instagram users, companies, celebrities, and politicians (including Barack and Michelle Obama) use the photo-sharing tool to connect with average citizens. The popularity of Instagram becomes extremely important when we learn more about how and why some young people are making use of this particular digital space.

Instagram does not allow anyone under the age of thirteen to use their app. However, it takes no more effort than lying about one’s birth-year to get around this restriction. Although nearly all social media companies place age restrictions on who can sign up to use their platform, these numbers become
arbitrary to any young person on a mission to be included in digital social spaces. Similar to most modes of media today, Instagram hosts content which can be inappropriate (or at least questionable) for children. While Instagram has rules about the types of photos that can be shared, as explained in their “community guidelines,” these rules are often broken. Some images may fall somewhere on the border of these rules, bending them with their problematic content. One guideline for which this is particularly true is their ban on content promoting self-harm and disordered eating. Figure 1 is a screenshot of Instagram’s policy regarding such photos.

Although this explanation may seem concise but unambiguous, the matter becomes much more complicated when considering exactly what kinds of images represent a coming together “to create awareness or find support”. Further, Instagram’s commitment to remove images “encouraging or urging people to embrace self-injury” is one difficult to uphold when all images depicting self-injury and eating disorders can be argued as encouraging these behaviors. In collecting images for this essay, I have found that these issues create a grey area, full of questions without definitive answers and problems without definitive solutions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Maintain our supportive environment by not glorifying self-injury.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Instagram community cares for each other, and is often a place where people facing difficult issues such as eating disorders, cutting, or other kinds of self-injury come together to create awareness or find support. We try to do our part by providing education in the app and adding information in the Help Center so people can get the help they need.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouraging or urging people to embrace self-injury is counter to this environment of support, and we’ll remove it or disable accounts if it’s reported to us. To protect people, we may also remove content identifying victims or survivors of self-injury if the content targets them for attack or humor.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Instagram’s Community Guidelines (2015a).

**Background**

As a double major in psychology and women’s studies with a minor in sociology, looking at the social interactions and patterns regarding psychological issues among girls and women is something I am highly interested in. I’ve always found eating disorders fascinating and, in choosing to research the Instagram sub-culture in which young girls glamorize these, it became evident to me that I could not
do so without also addressing the promotion of self-harm. Finding images which represent this sub-culture of self-deprecation in relation to one’s weight was easy; separating self-harm from disordered eating was not. In addition, choosing which images to use in my essay was made difficult due to the surprisingly vast amount of disturbing images I came across. Many of the girls who use Instagram in the manner that I am examining state that they have mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety, whether professionally or self-diagnosed. Some of them have attempted or look as if they plan to attempt suicide, often sharing images which suggest suicidal ideation. Many girls discuss binging and purging, the primary symptoms associated with bulimia nervosa. These conditions coupled with cultural and societal factors, which I will address later in this essay, push many girls to unhealthy coping mechanisms such as cutting, hitting, or starving oneself in the pursuit to be thin.


In the last year, the individual has, on 5 or more days, engaged in intentional self-inflicted damage to the surface of his or her body, of a sort likely to induce bleeding or bruising or pain (e.g., cutting, burning, stabbing, hitting, excessive rubbing), for purposes not socially sanctioned (e.g., body piercing, tattooing, etc.), but performed with the expectation that the injury will lead to only minor or moderate physical harm (p 803).

Most girls who share depictions of their own self-harm on Instagram likely fit this official diagnosis. For the purposes of this paper, I will be using the term “self-harm” to refer to images which show cutting or which discuss the desire to engage in cutting.

Eating disorders are somewhat popular in terms of their discussion in pop culture and among lay people. Terms such as “anorexia” and “bulimia” are frequently used but the official criteria for the disorders which they represent are generally somewhat misunderstood. The Center for Eating Disorders at Sheppard Pratt (2015) cites
the DSM V (2013) in three criteria used to diagnose Anorexia Nervosa:

Restriction of energy intake relative to requirements leading to a significantly low body weight..., Intense fear of gaining weight or becoming fat, and disturbance in the way one's body weight or shape is experienced, undue influence of body weight or shape on self-evaluation, or denial of the seriousness of the current low body weight” (para 1).

Bulimia Nervosa is characterized by episodes of bingeing followed by purging food from the body, usually by vomiting or the use of laxatives. The diagnosis also might include feeling out of control of one’s eating while bingeing, eating beyond the point of fullness, inappropriate compensatory behaviors following a binge, frequent dieting, and extreme concern with body weight and shape (The Alliance for Eating Disorder Awareness, 2013).

Identifying Patterns

The Problem

The intended purpose of Instagram is similar to that of any social networking outlet—to allow users to connect with other users. Instagram is somewhat unique in that it functions exclusively by hosting profiles on which users are able to share photos with brief descriptions. In addition, the photos can be added to public lists with the use of “hashtags.” The average Instagram user shares photos of their everyday lives — pets, friends, concerts, meals they eat — but photos can also include things like inspirational quotes and motivational images. Many users participate in sharing images revolving around fitness and health. In these instances, people are typically promoting healthy life advice and ways in which they feel they are bettering themselves. However, there is a disturbing sub-culture that can be found alongside this one on Instagram; one in which young people are sharing messages which promote dangerous (even deadly) behaviors. Finding these images requires nothing more than a search for specific hashtags used among young people who participate in this community, some of whom fall below the age requirement to create an Instagram account.

These numerous images feature depictions of extremely thin bodies and “thinspo” (which is an abbreviated term for the slang “thin-spiration.”) Some images feature sayings used to encourage girls to starve themselves or tips on how to eat as few calories as possible (or burn as many calories as possible) as part of an extreme diet.
plan. Others show images of cuts on arms and legs, many of which also feature words describing what it is like to live as someone who cuts and hides it from everyone they know. Unfortunately, these images collectively serve to promote these debilitating mental health issues and almost certainly encourage young people who have not yet engaged in these behaviors to try them as a means to cope with issues in their own lives. However, in looking at and contemplating each of these photos, the question of why girls share these types of things is repeated over and over. The answer is as difficult to find as a moving, invisible target, but in considering some patterns that are found in this subculture, we are able to theorize some possible reasons why girls participate in this relatively new method of sharing their stories.

All of the profiles and images I collected are public, but only some of them give details about the owner of the profile. I had hoped to be able to see more of the girls’ ages but I did see profiles belonging to girls ranging from as young as 12 to about 23.

Coded Language

In order to analyze the phenomenon of self-harm and eating disorder glamorization on Instagram, one has to have a basic understanding of the language being used among girls who participate in this particular subculture. This is an important place to start because the knowledge of what code words are used by the members of this community allows one to locate the problematic images which are included in this essay. As I dug deeper into my research, I would come across new nicknames being used for various psychological disorders and problematic behaviors. These words are most often found among the many “hashtags” used by the girls who post these public images. Hashtags function as both a descriptor for individual images and, according to Instagram’s website, “After you tag your post with a hashtag, you'll be able to tap the hashtag to see a page that shows all photos and videos people have uploaded with that hashtag” (Instagram, 2015b). In addition, one can locate all images which are tagged with a specific word by doing a search on the Instagram app. In Table 1, I’ve shown what coded hashtags are being used by girls and what the words stand for.

In addition to the use of coded hashtags, girls who participate in this culture of glamorization of disordered eating and self-harm often use coded abbreviations in their profile.
descriptions. This is due to both Instagram’s limiting the number of characters which can be used in profile descriptions and as a means to communicate only with people who understand the coded language.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hashtag / Code Word</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ana</td>
<td>Anorexia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mia</td>
<td>Bulimia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deb</td>
<td>Depression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ed/Ednos</td>
<td>Eating Disorder/ Not Otherwise Specified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cat</td>
<td>Self-harm/cutting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sue</td>
<td>Suicidal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinspo</td>
<td>Thin-spiration</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Coded Language on Instagram.

On many profiles, girls struggling with their weight will use abbreviations such as “HW, SW, CW, LW, GW, UGW”. These mean “heaviest weight, starting weight, current weight, lowest weight, goal weight, and ultimate goal weight,” respectively. Most often, the “ultimate goal weight” falls into the double digits, a weight at which few adults are considered healthy. Some girls also list their height and their body mass index (BMI) in their profile descriptions. Other common features in these profile descriptions are the number of suicide attempts they’ve had in the past, the disorders they have, and, for girls who struggle with self-harm or bulimia, the number of days since they’ve cut or had a binge/purge. Figures 2 through 5 show examples of profiles utilizing these methods.

![Figure 2. Instagram Profile 1 (2015).](image1)

![Figure 3. Instagram Profile 2 (2015).](image2)

![Figure 4. Instagram Profile “Ana Mia” (2015).](image3)
Using an online BMI calculator hosted by the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services and the National Institutes of Health, I found that the Figure 3 profile with the heading “Ana Mia” had a BMI of 22.7 at her highest weight. She lists her current BMI at 15.2, but my calculation found her to fall at 14.6. The Figure 4 profile for “xanax” had a starting BMI of 21.1. Her goal weights, in order, would decrease her BMI to 20.6, 19.7, 18.0, and ultimately, 16.3.

Although the Body Mass Index system of measurement has been heavily critiqued as an inaccurate measure of health, many doctors still use this method to determine general health status of a patient. In the BMI Categories chart (Table 2), we can see that these numbers place the owners of these profiles within the Normal Weight category to start, and deeply within the Underweight category as their current weight and ultimate goal weight. These unhealthy goals can only be obtained using the unhealthy method of starving oneself to lose weight. Therefore, the images that encourage such behaviors are encouraging anorexia in girls.

**Table 2. Body Mass Index (BMI) Categories (National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, 2015).**

**Image Features**

In addition to noticing the specific language used among members of the subculture I examined, I began to notice patterns in the types of images girls were sharing which promoted both eating disorders and self-harm. The first detail that becomes immediately obvious is the frequent use of grayscale rather than full-color. I believe that this detail stems from the desire to express a profound sadness among the girls suffering with these issues. The following images 1-2 are examples of the use of greyscale accompanying messages which epitomize a self-
depricating mindset in relation to one’s weight.

In addition to these types of images which directly convey a message of wanting to be thin, many of the graphic images of self-harm cuts and scars are made greyscale. In considering this, I began to theorize that the pictures may be changed to greyscale in order to diminish the shocking effect of the color of blood and fresh cuts. Due to this, I believe that taking the color from the images serves to decrease the shock value and limit negative reactions to even some of the most drastic images of self-harm. To illustrate this point, Image 3 features two full-color images that I have juxtaposed side-by-side to their greyscale versions. In both images, the greyscale version appears much less alarming. I believe that this method of dulling the senses to self-harm visuals could potentially encourage young people to feel as though cutting oneself is not a serious behavior. In fact, they may even view the dulled greyscale images as artistic.

Another important pattern that I noticed when looking at images of super-thin women is that they are generally reduced to body parts. Examples of these types of images are presented in Images 4-5. There are two main areas of the body which girls seem to focus on most when they adopt a disordered view of eating: the legs and
the midsection. More specifically, girls often demonstrate a longing for protruding collarbones and hipbones, and a sort of worship of the “thigh gap”. The latter term is one which refers to having thighs that do not touch one another when standing up straight with the feet together. In fact, the hashtag “feet together, thighs apart” is very popular among the members of this sub-culture.

Images which promote cutting or hurting oneself are frequently without words, but those that do include words are a clear illustration of the type of mentality that exists among many of the girls involved in this behavior. For example, they often communicate the idea that cutting relieves negative emotional states, such as stress, anxiety, loneliness, and depression. While people who self-harm do really experience a sense of relief when they engage in behaviors like cutting (Pipher, 1994), these images are problematic in that they send the message to those who have never self-injured that doing so will help relieve feelings of sadness, anger, or other feelings of pain and distress. That said, these images potentially serve as encouragement to start engaging in self-harm; and as Pipher states, “Once girls begin to cut
and burn themselves, they are likely to continue” (p.158).

Images similar to those that encourage trying self-harm as a means of relief also exist in relation to using disordered modes of eating as a way to lose weight. For example, in one image I came across, the words “Hey, I’m Ana and I’ll be your Best Friend” are written over a black background. Another image features a thin model standing by the words “Every time you say no to food, you say yes to thin.” These two photos are just a minute example of the number of photographs that can be found in this thin-obsessed culture on Instagram. Many girls share images which promise that they will avoid food in a particular way based on the number of “likes” the photo receives. The example in Image 8 promises that the Instagram user will fast for one hour per every like the photo receives. One other common image that I’ve found says something along the lines of, “Name a food and I won’t eat it for a month.” Further, the participants in the pro-anorexia community share photos with tips on dieting, such as how many calories to eat per day, ways to exercise excessively, and how to burn calories
using unconventional methods, such as soaking in a cold bath (Images 9-10).

![Image 9. #anatip (Instagram, 2015).](image)

![Image 10. #anatip (Instagram, 2015).](image)

**What It All Means**

Just as the illnesses associated with the sharing of pro-eating disorder and self-harm photographs are not new, the Instagram community of pro-anorexia is not a new invention, and it is not an isolated one either. The self-harm images are newer, which might be explained by the historical and cultural factors that push girls to engage in self-harm in the first place. I have read stories from girls and women who self-harm and who have had eating disorders. These stories tell me that while individual causes lead girls to choose these behaviors, there is a greater cultural and societal force at work which is pushing not just a few, but hundreds of thousands of girls into the territory of self-loathing.

**Why Should We Care?**

The beauty industry and modern media both contribute to the phenomenon of self-hate that is plaguing American girls and young women. The pressure to be thin has pushed many girls to extreme measures of weight loss and some have lost their lives due to eating disorders and the many health complications that come with them. While disorders such as Anorexia Nervosa aren’t new, the external pressures that cause girls to starve themselves for thinness are evolving at an unprecedented rate. Girls are exposed to messages that demand beauty from them almost from birth. Diet industries bank on the knowledge
that increased feelings of unhappiness with one’s appearance prompt consumers to spend money on products that they hope will change the way they look. As such unhappiness festers within young girls who feel that they will be unlovable if they are anything other than what society encourages them to be, they become prone to depression and anxiety. Such psychological distress coupled with the turmoil that comes with growing up and figuring oneself out, girls who feel they have no outlet for their suffering have turned to inflicting physical harm on the bodies that society pressures them to despise.

The pain that adolescent girls are feeling in today’s media-saturated culture is a sort of torture that is creating women who are forever scarred by the sadness that is forced upon them. Self-hatred is an enormously toxic force and is one that is difficult to overcome. The pressure to be perfect is overwhelming. Girls feel that their physical presence is one to be minimized and at the same time, their voices become muted. They punish themselves when they feel embarrassed, disliked, or ashamed of how they look. Sometimes, that punishment comes in the form of cutting or burning oneself. Sometimes it is a massive food binge followed by vomiting or taking laxatives to prevent weight gain. At any rate, girls are feeling enormous amounts of negative emotions day in and day out. They wear long sleeves and pants in the summer to hide the cuts on their arms or legs, they tuck razors under their mattresses, and they use their allowance to purchase diet pills. All of this suffering among girls in America and other developed countries is impacting everyone in society. Women who grew up struggling with eating disorders or self-harm often do not get better until someone pushes them to do so. They bring the psychological distress with them into their relationships; they bring it to work and they bring it into their parenting. They are essentially leading lives fractured by the issues that girls spend time promoting on their Instagram pages.

It can, and rightfully should, be said that American Instagram users have a right to share whatever content they’d like, per their first amendment right to free speech. Girls using Instagram to share thinspo or self-harm promoting material aren’t outright hurting anyone. They aren’t explicitly threatening lives and they aren’t aggressively causing harm to others. However, it can also be said that messages which encourage starving oneself or harming oneself...
When a pre-teen girl who was called fat by someone at school comes across an image with a saying like “No one loves a fat girl,” aren’t those messages threatening their wellbeing by attacking their capacity to maintain a normal self-esteem and sense of self-worth? When a teenage girl whose own family makes fun of her for being moody comes across an image suggesting that cutting oneself will relieve her feelings of loneliness and being misunderstood, isn’t Instagram allowing their users to encourage unhealthy coping mechanisms that can even prove deadly? Free speech is an enormously important part of modern society. It can be used to create lasting, positive change in so many ways. However, free speech that encourages eating disorders, self-harm, and even suicide is not a positive thing in society.

While social media continues to grow in size and influence, the lives of Americans are being impacted in new ways. It is everyone’s responsibility to question the ways that social media can benefit and harm members of society. Regardless of their users’ age, race, class, gender, or culture, Instagram profits from the idea that a picture is worth a thousand words. With 30 billion photos on Instagram, it’s time to seriously question what those 30 trillion words are.

References


Appendix

If you or someone you know is currently struggling with these issues, help is available.

For SUNY Brockport students:
- Hazen Hall Counseling Center: (585) 395-2207
- counselingcenterquestions@brockport.edu

For non-Brockport students in the United States:
- S.A.F.E. Alternatives (Self-Abuse Finally Ends) information line: 800-DONTCUT (366-8288)
- National Eating Disorder Association: 800-931-2237 or 212-575-6200
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 800-273-TALK (8255)
- National Suicide Helpline: 800-SUICIDE (784-2433)
- Suicide Prevention Center Hotline: 877-727-4747

For further resources visit:
- nationaleatingdisorders.org
- teenlineonline.org/yyp
- adolescentselfinjuryfoundation.com/page18
- treatmentadvocacycenter.org/get-help/
- twloha.com/find-help/local-resources/
"It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences."

-AUDRE LORDE-