Note to Readers: It is important to note that the focus groups conducted for this report are not based on a representative sample of young women between the ages of 14-24. Rather, our aim was to offer a starting point to further explore the representation of female sexuality and social networking technologies. Therefore, all references to the participants’ responses cannot be generalized. They are used here for illustrative purposes only.

“As a woman you have to be skinny, a mother, look amazing and have 18 kids. You have to be all things.” (Participant of EKOS focus group)

Ideals of ‘perfection’ regarding the female body and its representations have been a mainstay of modern western societies as early as the nineteenth century. (Brumberg, 1997) In the past, girls and young women were preoccupied with good looks and the ‘promise’ of their sexuality because it often meant the difference between being married and thus a social success, or a life of spinsterhood. In this historical context, female sexuality was linked to economic survival. Girls and young women are no longer constrained by the ‘marry-or-perish’ imperative of the nineteenth and early twentieth century but how you look and more importantly, how you depict yourself continue to be defining factor of social success.

The shifting meanings of girlhood and female sexuality are historically and context specific (Jiwani, Steenbergen, and Mitchell, 2006) although female sexuality has always been constructed as either innocent and pure and in need of protection or something dangerous, unpredictable, and therefore to be feared. In this whore/Madonna paradox, the social and cultural anxieties attributed to female sexuality are often played out on the bodies of girls and young women. The sexualization of girls and young women is not, however, a twenty-first century phenomenon. Moral panics that often translated into
political, legal, and social policies became part of the regulatory practices to help contain the unpredictability of female sexuality especially in girlhood. (Strange, 1995; Adams, 1997; Myers, 2006) In their work on young girls in early twentieth century United States and Canada, Kathy Peiss and Veronica Strong-Boag show how girls as early as the 1920s were using cosmetics and social gathering such as dance halls to enhance their popularity among their peers or engage in sex. (Strong-Boag, 1988; Peiss, 1989)

Most of the representations of female sexuality available to girls and young women throughout the mid-twentieth century and up until today valourize white, middle-class bodies that communicate heteronormative codes of behaviour. In the complex world that intersects the beauty, entertainment, and fashion industries, the thin, white, tall, and big bust body has become a veritable ‘cash cow.’ Female sexuality has become a commodity in itself, a cultural reality with a long history (Gentile, 2006; Graydon, 2004). Daniel Cook and Susan Kaiser argue girls have become a “better niche market” than boys because they represent “predicable economic stuff such as accessories, clothes, make-up and shoes.”(2004, 204) The new market categories of “tweens and teens are considered key to profit margins. (Cook and Kaiser, 2004) As a result, companies feature images of girls and young women to help sell their products and they use both established and emerging media including Facebook, My Space, magazines, billboards, newspaper, television, movies, and music videos.(Banet-Weiser, 2004; Lamb and Brown, 2006).

Participants in the MediaAction/EKO focus groups in Vancouver, Toronto, Ottawa, and Montreal explored a number of questions about female representation in the media. They were asked to offer definitions of girl power, examples of how the media portray girl power and examples of people they believe exemplify this cultural construction. Participants were also asked about the main images and messages used to convey female sexuality both in terms of physical and behavioural attributes. In order to determine if these same messages were repeated in “non-media sources” (teachers, parents, community groups, etc), participants were asked to offer some insight as to what notions of female sexuality they received from these sources. Finally, they were asked to think about images and messages of female sexuality they would like to receive from media sources.

It is this depiction or representation of what is culturally understood as female sexuality that becomes the central project of identity formation in girls and young women. When asked to describe the dominant images and messages portraying female sexuality in the media, 14-24 year old participants generally cited flawlessness, perfection, slenderness, sexiness and ‘conventional’ beauty (usually read as white and middle-class). They also said that women who acted ‘less intelligent’, and were overtly available and willing to objectify themselves for men were the most common depictions of girls and young women in the media.

The words used to describe what the participants thought were stereotypically and predominantly the images that they saw on a daily basis through various media were: “attractive”, “sleazy”, “stupid”, “objects”, “powerful”, “rich”. Participants spoke about how some images focused on women having “soft skin and no body hair”, “wearing
revealing clothing”, “being sexual and looking sexy”, “being thin” or a “perfect size.” They also mentioned how hip hop videos depicted curvaceous women with ‘big bums, long hair and a big chest.’[17-19] One participant in the 20 to 24 year old group showed considerable media literacy when she commented that “sex sells” and that most of the images she sees are women who are ‘Caucasian looking’ and that ‘western culture dominates.’ The consensus in this group was that the images being shown were “unattainable” and “unrealistic.”

It is in this context that girls and young women who do not ‘fit,’ such as, ‘fat’ girls, queers, people living with disabilities, racialized populations, and girls without the economic power to “keep up” with the trends that maintain your popularity often feel socially isolated, harassed, or invisible.(Kulick and Menely, 2005; Braziel and LeBesco, 2001; McRobbie, 2000; Bogden, 1988) In the world of young people where “fitting in” feels like an all-or-nothing game, being labeled outside what has been defined historically and culturally as acceptable female sexuality can be a damaging and traumatic experience sometimes leading to body image issues. Self-esteem is at the core of these body image issues, which in some cases leads to tragic situations such as anorexia nervosa or attempts to ‘rectify’ the ‘problem areas’ with cosmetic surgery. (Graydon, 2004)

Responses from participants of the EKOS focus groups included commentary on how representations of boys and men in the media differ considerably from those for girls and young women. In this instance, participants felt that a double standard existed so that “Society as a whole will worship guys who come across as good or bad, tough, responsible, independent and even weird like Peter Wentz”; They don’t feel the same pressure we do because they don’t have to conform to one specific image.” (Graydon, 2004; Bordo, 2001)[MG14-16] The girls and young women interviewed were particularly struck by the media’s tendency to portray men in greater diversity, depicting them in ‘all shapes and sizes.’ In the words of one participant, “It’s not about looks with them—it’s about personality!” Consequently, it is not uncommon to encounter “nerdy men” or “chubby men” in the media who continue to garner social respect or even political currency in a way not available to women (for example, the current hit movie, Knocked Up, featuring a male romantic lead who is demonstrably overweight). Finally, this double standard was described by one participant in this way: “Media wise, there is more of a spotlight on the Barbie girl, the idea of the Ken doll has faded.”

**Girl Power: Agency and Alternative Images**

“Resisting the images depends on how confident you are” [TG 14-16]

Girl power as a concept is constantly shifting -- partly due to debates about how it has become yet another consumer gimmick, and partly due to the fact that its meaning is related to ideals of ‘youth feminism’ and anti-consumerism. (Gonick, 2006) The term can be traced to the early 1990s and was adopted by a movement of young, mainly white, middle-class women, some of which were queer-identified who called themselves Riot Grrrls. (Gonick 2006, 6; Riordan, 2001) According to Marnina Gonick, the Riot Grrrls used “Girl Power”,

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...as a strategy of reclaiming the word girl using it strategically to distance themselves from the adult patriarchal worlds of status, hierarchies, and standards. Girl Power celebrates the fierce and aggressive potential of girls as well as reconstitution of girl culture as a positive force embracing self-expression through fashion, attitude, and a Do-It-Yourself (DIY) approach to cultural production.

(2006, 7)

The accompanying slogans “Girl Rule” and “Girls Kick Ass” (Banet-Weiser, 2004) quickly became appropriated by the beauty-industry complex (a term to describe the interconnectedness between the beauty, fashion, and entertainment industries) when they became popularized by pop bands such as Spice Girls and appeared on t-shirts. (Gentile, 2006) It is precisely the commercialization of the this term that leads some feminists to question the ability of young women to use this term as a point of agency, as it was originally intended by the Riot Grrrls. In other words, as a popular, non-threatening alternative to feminism, girl power helps to construct activism among young women through cultural signifiers (music, clothing, hair styles) rather than a “space for social or political action.”(Gonick 2006, 10)

Ophelia discourses can be traced to the national bestseller by Mary Pipher, Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls published in 1994, as a way to describe the crisis of girlhood. (Gonick 2006, 11) The crisis of girlhood this discourse refers to concerns of girls’ vulnerability and the dangers they face growing up. (Gonick 2006, 11) Although feminists take issue with this construction of the fragile adolescent girl, Gonick places Ophelia as the “shadow twin to the idealized empowered girl.”(2006, 15) As a discourse, Ophelia becomes a signifier of the possible fallout or failure of young women’s ability to “produce the required attributes of the neoliberal feminine subject.”(2006, 15) In other words, adolescent girls negotiate the consumer landscape with negative consequences.

In an attempt to understand and offer an analysis of the growing social acceptance of both ‘girl power’ and ‘reviving Ophelia’ as cultural representations of girlhood and young women, Gonick argues that their cultural currency is linked to neoliberal discourse of individualism. (2006) Gonick suggests that “on many levels the Girl Power and Reviving Ophelia discourses represent a social and cultural fascination with girls that also is an expression of the uncertainties, tensions, fears, and anxieties elicited by the rapid social, economic, and political changes taking place due to neoliberal policies.” (2006, 5) In other words, popular culture phenomenon such as ‘girl power’ and ‘reviving Ophelia’ have become increasingly entrenched in neoliberal ideology which promotes identity and even ‘character’ as people who can act separately from community and ‘make it’ in the world. Whereas both of these ‘personas’ can contribute to moments of agency and resistance, their commodification and mainstreaming are used to maintain the status-quo and counter community activism advocated by certain strains of feminism.

Despite these debates among scholars and feminists on the many meanings and limitations of girl power, this term and what it represents had important implications for
the participants of the EKOS focus groups. When asked to define the term, participants were able to identify that it became a household word in the 1990s in order to increase the appeal of various female artists. They also said that girl power meant girls and women who stand-up for themselves or who are confident, assert their influence and lead others; and girls and women who can perform the same tasks as men and receive equal recognition and self-respect. However, one participant in the 20-24 year old focus group suggested that the term had become commercialized and was basically a marketing ploy.

When asked what they would rather see as images representing female bodies and sexuality in the media, participants, across the age cohorts used phrases such as, ‘like the skin you are in,’ ‘promote and encourage diversity in representations of women,’ ‘less focus on physical appearance and more of a focus on character,’ ‘less emphasis on sex and more emphasis on looking good,’ ‘different types of female role models,’ ‘[more] honesty in the way women are portrayed,’ ‘be confident,’ ‘girls can do anything boys can do but better,’ ‘women are intelligent,’ ‘models should be larger sized and more realistic,’ ‘women should be educated,’ ‘self-assured,’ ‘diverse,’ and ‘strong.’ In these examples, we see that the participants were more inclined towards images that depicted what they understood to be closer to the ‘reality’ they experienced on a daily basis than the images they were exposed to. Indeed, in many ways, these phrases and comments reflect considerable awareness among this group of girls and young women about how representations of women in the media is often contrived and based on fantasy. Participants were interested in seeing more images of women with what they called ‘healthy’ and diverse body types as well as bodies that depicted ‘ethnic diversity.’ The consensus that emerged regarding the desirable message was expressed by one group as “Be who you are—not who society tells you to be” and to “strive for inner beauty and not outer beauty.”

The question of agency and resistance was a reoccurring issue among the participants. Some felt that overall, they were powerless to exact any change, small or large, in the way women’s bodies and sexuality are portrayed. In fact, some participants felt that overt rejection of the ideals depicted or even outright resistance often meant some sort of social punishment or consequences. For example, two participants were particular about sharing their own experience of being rewarded socially for embracing these ideals: “I realized that when I started to look better, I was treated better”; “More people talk to me now that my hair is longer.” Another participant offered this comment as an example of what happens if you don’t ‘make an effort’: “If you buy something and it is out of style, people look at you funny.” Contradicting the dominant images was seen as a sure way to unpopularity or social rejection by peers, no matter the social networking setting.

Yet, some participants did believe that their individual actions could make a difference in combating detrimental images of female bodies and sexuality. Participants offered these actions as solutions: “I resist the media by taking 10 minutes to wake up in the morning; I don’t wear any make up;” “I have days when I get up and purposefully refuse to wear make-up and deodorant and force myself to go out;” “We have stopped shaving and stopped wearing bras.” Another said that she has cancelled her cable subscription because she grew tired of the messages and images on TV. Using their consumer power to exact
change is clearly an important way to resist. One participant expressed frustration with how the images of overly sexualized female bodies actually clashed with her own sensibilities and comfort levels stating that “I am a very conservative person who doesn’t feel comfortable wearing the kind of clothing I see the girls wearing on TV. I don’t like to show skin and refuse to do it at any cost.” [14-16] Participants mentioned celebrities Rosie O’Donnell and Jennifer Hudson who performed in Dreamgirls (2006) as examples of women who contradicted the norm but enjoy success. Oprah Winfrey, Angelina Jolie, Hillary Clinton, and even Joan of Arc were also considered role models of women or girls that have used their ‘girl power’ to make a difference.

Boycotting magazines, letter writing campaigns, petitions, creating and disseminating zines, participating in online groups and forums, and creating counter websites were cited as possible political and social activities that girls and young women could undertake to help combat normative ideals and messages of female sexuality as portrayed in the media. It is perhaps in these efforts to establish alternative sites of resistance that we see girls and young women thinking about how their individual and communal agency could create counter messages.

The focus group research conducted by EKOS confirmed what was already known in the literature. While this might suggest that attitudes have not changed in the past years, the efforts of the young women in these focus groups to resist being sexualized by the media is a most refreshing finding, and one that makes the efforts of Action Media Action necessary now and in the future.

References


