"Tank Tops Are Ok but I Don't Want to See Her Thong"

Girls' Engagements With Secondary School Dress Codes

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School conduct codes invariably include special mention of dress, often with some reference to concerns about revealing dress. Drawing on eight focus groups with secondary students in Southern Ontario, this article explores female students' responses to such dress codes. Many young women were critical of certain aspects of their schools' dress codes and how they are enforced; yet, they were also scornful of girls who wear revealing clothing. These focus group discussions indicate the fine line girls must continue to negotiate in their self-presentation, their active negotiation of school dress codes, their participation in the regulation of normative gender and sexuality, and their concomitant contestation of such regulation.

Keywords: *dress codes; gender; sexuality*

Halter-tops, tube-tops, one shoulder tops . . . muscle shirts, see-through or mesh tops (unless underneath a shirt) aren't to be worn. Blouses, shirts or tops that reveal bare backs, midriffs, undergarments, or that have spaghetti straps or revealing necklines are not to be worn in Trent's classes, hallways, class activities, or on field trips.

<div align="right">Trent Secondary</div>

A common feature of schools across North America is a code of conduct or a set of rules outlining the expectations for student behavior and consequences for rule infractions. Most codes of conduct also include a dress code, like the one cited above, that describes unacceptable dress, frequently citing short skirts, revealing tops, ripped or torn clothing, heavy chains, and so forth. Such dress codes are commonly justified through

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explanations that dress code violations are distracting to others, not fitting the desired image of a school, and disrespectful toward oneself and others (Raby, 2005). The details of dress codes do shift, however, as school administrators respond to trends in popular fashion, as reflected in rules banning midriff tops now making way for new concerns with girls revealing cleavage. These dress codes also reflect broader social concerns about young people's dress as illustrated in recent examples of young women being asked to cover up on Southwest Airlines (Tarrant, 2007) and several American towns banning young men from wearing low-slung pants that reveal their underwear. Of course, dress codes are also gendered. Dress codes participate in a broader, on-going cultural concern with forms of female dress (and sexuality), defining what is acceptable (Pomerantz, 2007). They consequently normalize certain forms of girlhood, problematize others, and suggest girls' responsibility for the school's moral climate.

This article draws on data collected through focus groups with secondary students within a southern region of Ontario, Canada, in which young people were asked about their school rules and what they think of them. Within these focus groups, dress codes received particular attention, especially from the female participants, with discussion concentrated on girls' clothing. These young women had a nuanced analysis of dress codes, although in most groups there were also striking moments when they condemned girls who dress like "sluts." This article thus concentrates on the female participants' negotiation of dress codes, for within such commentaries these young women both contest and reproduce institutional and peer regulation of girls' dress.

This article does not join the current chorus of concern about the dangers of girls wearing revealing clothing or aspiring to be porn stars (Levy, 2005). In fact, although accepting garments such as spaghetti straps in certain contexts, the young women who participated in my focus groups were far more likely to stigmatize a girl in clothing they considered too revealing. Neither will this article address the boys' commentaries directly nor the experiences of individual girls who are labeled as sluts and their experiences of such stigmatization. Rather, I examine my female respondents' casual, public, and complex discussions of their school dress codes, discussions which flag current challenges in negotiating girlhood as girls navigate the fine line between attractive and provocative. I also consider how these statements are embedded within educational structures, especially the rules and the actions of teachers, wider social patterns of fashion and media, and peer cultures. These focus-group conversations disrupt an easy interpretation of girls as either embracing or condemning bodily displays. They also illustrate young women actively, and sometimes critically, constructing gender.

Literature

Within North America, several distinct and conflicting strands of popular commentary currently frame discussions of young women and their clothing. First, various scholars and popular writers have explored the gendered, sexual double standard, which has stigmatized girls who are deemed to be sluts. *Slut!* By Leora Tanenbaum (1999) and *Fast Girls* by Emily White (2002), both written for nonacademic audiences, discusses how certain girls are labeled slut by their peers and the devastating consequences. Their research found that within White, suburban America this powerful term is applied to girls who develop sooner than others, are isolated, fail to conform, and who to have experienced sexual abuse at some point in their lives (White, 2002).

At the same time, other recent, popular texts present quite a different picture, which suggests a moral panic around girls' provocative dress (Pomerantz, 2006). For instance, Ariel Levy (2005) cited pole-dancing classes, mid-riff tops, *Charlie's Angels,* porn stars, and *Girls Gone Wild* video collections to argue that girls and women actively participate in a sexualized North American culture in which female raunch is now celebrated in the false belief that it is a liberating and powerful progression of feminism. Rather than stigma, sluttiness in high school brings stardom; girls learn that to get attention from boys they need to perform themselves as sexy. Yet, this is not really sexual empowerment or liberation, Levy argued, but instead it is absorption into a consumerist, sexist culture.

Wendy Shalit (2007) is also concerned that girls have come to the false belief that sexual promiscuity is powerful, although in her new book *Girls Gone Mild*, she celebrates a new modesty movement in which girls are embracing a conservative, good-girl image through modest fashion and chastity. Shalit argued that these young women who reject raunch culture are moral heroines. Tarrant (2007) is concerned that Shalit locates girls' power in their virtue—suggesting that sexual girls disrespect themselves— and consequently stigmatizing girls who are sexual, reinforcing traditional gender roles and positioning girls and women as "the gatekeepers of what's sexually appropriate" (p. 62).

Whether girls marginalize others through the label of slut, embrace a sexualized culture, or rally against it through embracing modesty, girls' dress is the focus of significant commentary, evaluation, and regulation (Duits & van Zoonen, 2006). Such commentary often references girls' socialization or their internalization of culture (Christensen & Prout, 2005). For example, by categorizing others as sluts, girls are seen to draw on the culturally

embedded language of patriarchy, using it to compete with one another. Chambers, van Loon, and Tinknell (2004) suggested that when their female respondents policed other girls' reputations by using terms like slut or *slag* (the British equivalent), they "thus colluded with dominant sexual models by internalizing sexist comments also offered by boys they encountered" (p. 408). In her discussion of the stigma of slut, Tanenbaum (1999) similarly argued that girls reproduce and reinforce the sexual double standard to exercise power over other women. White (2002) argued that girls warn sluts to stay away from their boyfriends; Brown (2003) also presented slut-bashing as being about competition between girls. Brown found girls cruel as they access power through the objectification and dehumanization of each other and thus favoring a male gaze (Brown, 2003). Brown suggested that this is not real power, however, but rather a tactic that detaches girls from each other and keeps everyone vulnerable. Similarly, Levy (2005) saw young women's embrace of raunch culture as ultimately colluding in their own objectification.

These positions acknowledge the structural environments within which young men and women learn about gender and sexuality and recognize girls' participation in the production of peer and wider culture. They rightly point to the misogyny and inequality that is perpetuated by girls. Yet, sometimes such representations of slut-bashing can imply that boys and men more actively create social space and their own dominant positions while girls uncritically reproduce their own subordination. For example, Brown's recognition of competition between girls is important for identifying the role of power in girls' relationships, but ultimately this competition is seen to perpetuate boys' reality. What of girls' agency, analysis, and the complexity of power relations within their lives? Are girls only considered to have agency when they embrace modesty, as Shalit (2007) seemed to imply?

A recent body of research on girls has emerged that draws on feminist poststructuralism (Butler, 1990) and the new sociology of childhood (James & Prout, 1990). This work has been particularly noteworthy for examining how girls, as social agents, negotiate social structures and discourses that reproduce girls' marginality (Baxter, 2002). Such positions recognize that gender is not fixed into two clear categories of masculinity and femininity but that instead gender is fluid and intersected by a number of other identities, including class, sexuality, age, race, ethnicity, and so on, providing for a range of masculinities and femininities. This complication of femininity and gendered power relations among girls and young women is seen, for example, in Baxter's own research and in the works of Davies (1989), Hey (1997), Reay (2001), Renold (2005), and Pomerantz, (2007). These authors

identify how girls negotiate competing and often contradictory discourses as active, social agents who participate in the construction of the social world around them (Davies, 1989; James & Prout, 1990) and who can concomitantly invest in, play with, and critique dominant representations of femininity (Bettis & Adams, 2003; Russel & Tyler, 2002).

As will become evident below, young women debate clothing rules, break dress codes, speak up against sexual double standards even while reproducing them (Kitzinger, 1995) and yet also rail against other girls' revealing dress. Such multiple meanings, contradiction, and resistance all need attention. Otherwise, girls are left in a bit of a bind. If they dress provocatively, they reproduce patriarchy and their own oppression (Levy, 2005), but if they criticize those who dress provocatively, they similarly reproduce patriarchy and their own oppression (Tanenbaum, 1999). I illustrate that girls must (and do) actively negotiate such contradictory messages of girlhood (Tolman, 2002) and locate their forming selves within and against them, through challenge and reproduction.

Method

It is required that schools in this study's region have a dress code. These dress codes differ to some extent between schools but generally include no gang-related, ripped, or torn clothing; no winter jackets; nonreligious headgear or hoods; no beachwear or other distracting clothing; no clothing promoting hatred, advertising tobacco, alcohol, or drugs; and no jewelry, such as spiked bracelets, dog collars, or heavy chains that could be used as a weapon. It is quite common in this region for school rules to specifically state that provocative clothing is not allowed, occasionally even citing specific items of girls' clothing . Dress code details are often framed in terms of respect for others and self-respect in which certain activities, such as doing drugs or wearing provocative clothing, are considered to indicate a lack of self-respect (Raby, 2005).

This article draws on eight focus groups, two from the summer of 2004 and six from 2005, with a diverse range of young people in a southern region of Ontario, Canada, made up of small cities and farmland. Focus groups were conducted with local groups of secondary students located through word of mouth and direct requests to community organizations (see appendix). Participants in the focus groups were usually those who showed up for a drop-in program, were interested in the topic, and who remembered their parental consent forms. Often they were friends.

Focus groups were conducted with young people who already knew each other as it is in familiar peer groups that people make meaning and produce themselves as subjects. Focus groups are also a useful method to use with adolescents: The age-based power imbalance between researchers and participants is to some extent diluted by the increased number of participants a focus group offers as it "can shift the balance of power in favour of the participants" (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999, p. 18). Focus groups can thus provide comfort for younger participants, particularly if they are participating with their friends, and conversations can move in directions unanticipated by the researcher as participants have greater control (Warr, 2005). Notably, various researchers have argued that focus groups are better at capturing process and interaction than individual experiences (Mitchell, 1999; Smithson, 2000). In this article, it is specifically public, interactive speech about girls and dress codes that is examined.

The focus groups lasted about an hour and a half and ranged in size from 3 to an unwieldy 14. Participants received a small honorarium. Questions addressed not only dress codes but also school rules in general, asking if they are fair, if they are fairly applied, which rules they would change, what recourse they have if they feel they have been unfairly accused of breaking a rule, and whether students should participate in creating school rules. Participants had the opportunity to provide private, written comments at the end of their focus group, although few added anything new. As a form of member checking, they were also all sent a summary report and an invitation for comments once the focus groups were completed, but none were forthcoming.

This analysis concentrates on parts of the focus groups where the students addressed dress codes. Such conversations included debates about the relative merits of uniforms and discussion of rules against hats, gang wear, and provocative writing or images on T-shirts. They also addressed revealing dress, discussion that tended to be quite involved and dominated by the girls. It is important to acknowledge, however, that although the focus here is on girls' comments, these comments were usually made in the presence of boys and sometimes in response to boys' comments (which are also included where present). Data analysis involved extensive coding of all transcript segments referring to dress codes. Codes were then organized into two models. The first model categorized codes into the descriptive categories of accepting dress codes, critical of dress codes, and identities (which included references to sexuality, class, etc.). The second model

identified more analytic subcategories for each of these descriptive categories and explored the complicating intersections between them; for example, a subcategory of accepting dress codes was forced gaze, which I discuss below. This subcategory was then found to intersect with othering, gender, and sexuality. Finally, I created a summary of the group discussion dynamics for each focus group.

Critical Engagements With Appropriate Dress

Many participants were critical of certain features of their dress codes that focused on appropriate dress, their application, and fellow participants' defense of them. They also narrated instances when their critique resulted in comments to school staff or openly resistant actions, including rule breaking (Raby & Domitrek, 2007). Together these engagements suggest that these young women held detailed knowledge of the rules, keenly observed their application, and were sufficiently concerned about injustices that they were sometimes willing to act on them.

All participants demonstrated extensive awareness of what the specific school rules were. Girls, in particular, were acutely aware of the fine details of the dress codes. In response to these rules, they were frequently inclined to debate the rules' exact details, rather than accepting or rejecting them altogether.

> I: And the spaghetti strap thing too, you think, you should be able to wear tank tops?
> Barb: Well maybe not spaghetti straps but like /
> Betty: Yeah, that's kinda acceptable.
> Emilia: Yeah, like a one-finger [strap] sort of thing, not like some little thing you can snap off [chuckling and agreement from group].
> Betty: It's not a big deal. (Focus Group 4)[1]

Such comments illustrated the importance of dress details and that the girls recognized a fine line between acceptable and unacceptable clothing.[2] When critical of these details, the girls most commonly referred to practical needs and occasionally to self-expression.

Practical needs, based on temperature or efficient negotiation of the day, came up frequently to criticize many school rules, though this strategy may have hidden other, unspoken intentions behind revealing dress. Notably, girls commonly referenced practicality by arguing that tank tops, spaghetti straps, short skirts, and muscle shirts should be acceptable when it is hot

out rather than mentioning a desire to look good, to be sexy, or to experience pleasure in dress. One way to avoid framing clothing choices in terms of sexuality is to emphasize the practical nature of one's choices. This pattern resonates with Gleeson and Frith (2004) who observed that girls are ambiguous in their talk about sexual clothing because, they argued, "being explicit about sexual intentions is inherently fraught" (p. 103). They found that girls would explain their clothing choices through the language of personal taste rather than sexual attractiveness. Extending this emphasis on practicality, some participants also suggested that rules against revealing dress, and their enforcement, unfairly target girls.

> Catherine: That's like, the spaghetti strap rule is like kind of unfortunate because it's like, for boys it's not a problem, and it's just like, "Sorry I am a female like and it's hot and I would like to wear a spaghetti strap tank top," but it's like "No, no you must not expose skin," which is kind of ridiculous 'cause /
> Janice: You are not even showing anything, just your arm [laughs].
> Catherine: Yeah, you're really not; it is just your body; it's like "Oh no the human body!" (Focus Group 1)

Although Catherine and Janice quite typically drew on practical bodily need (being warm) and the naturalized human body to explain their dress choices, they also used humor to point out both the gendered nature of such rules and institutional discomfort with bodies.

An inclination to question the dress codes based on personal taste arose occasionally, though not frequently, through the language of individuality and self-expression. Nicole framed this position most directly:

> With dress-code rules, just—I understand like you can't wear like racist comments or whatever, like rude comments on your shirts and that. But if a girl wants to dress like a sleaze then she should be allowed to 'cause that is part of Canada and part of our Charter of Rights and Freedoms. (Focus Group 3)

Even while defending freedom of expression, however, Nicole disparages other girls' dress. Such complicated entanglements, in which participants both criticized the rules and sexism embedded in their application while reproducing a denigration of other girls' presentation of self, were common in the focus groups. Overall, the boys were more likely than the girls to defend clothing choices based on individual expression.

A number of groups were also critical of frequency, inconsistency, and inequality in the enforcement of dress codes. Several groups noted the significant energy staff invested in regulating student dress, from hats to

spaghetti straps. They also noticed that the regulation of clothing differed between teaching staff and, more importantly, between students. When discussing the regulation of revealing dress, two groups suggested that larger or more developed girls were more likely to be told to go home and change or to put a sweater on, for example.[3]

> Barbara: There is some favoritism. /
> Lana: with dress code stuff 'cause . . . um, who was it? A couple of days ago she had a—she just had a tank top on and because she had like, bigger, breasts [pause and chuckling] she got told to put a shirt on. But someone else who has like, you know, smaller and everything, they just didn't care. (Focus Group 4)

Participants in Focus Group 8 also noted that students who challenge the status quo, such as those who wear a lot of black, are more likely to be policed for wearing tank tops. They similarly observed a contradiction where if a girl wears a skimpy top she is told to put on her jacket, and yet wearing your jacket is also against the rules. Overall participants felt that dress codes are inconsistently applied, subject to personal interpretation (e.g., in terms of defining appropriate dress), and overpoliced (although a minority also felt that dress codes are sometimes underpoliced).

Participants similarly criticized boys for seeming to prefer to go out with girls who wear sleazy clothes and the fashion industry for shaping girls' dress. For example, Patricia (Focus Group 1) stated, "But you know what's really wrong though, that all the girls' clothes are made to be a slut," and others in Focus Group 4 were critical of the adoration of fashion star Paris Hilton. In Focus Group 3, the students critically evaluated concerns with provocative clothing by recognizing that cultural norms are contextual:

> I: Why is it a problem to see underwear or thongs or pubic hair or whatever?
> Carrie: It's different in different parts of the world, but like in Canada it's considered indecent, I dunno why. In Europe, it's not like . . . "bad." [Talking over each other] there's porn advertised on the lampposts!
> //
> Tina: Yeah, I dunno what it is I think if everyone just kinda goes "I don't want to see that." Like a kinda collective thing. (Focus Group 3)

In these examples, we see the participants identifying and criticizing broader cultural patterns that extend beyond the specific school rules and yet impact on questions of dress. They make sense of multiple registers of culture.

As with the above discussion by Focus Group 1 on revealing the human body, respondents frequently drew on humor to make fun of the dress codes in ways that challenged them and the structural inequalities they reflect.

> I: So you think boys should be allowed to wear muscle shirts.
> Betty: Well it's hot!
> [Everyone laughing]
> Betty: No, I mean!
> [Everyone laughing harder]
> Betty: Let me retract that!
> [Continued laughing]
> Barbara: She was so serious! "Oh, it's hot!"
> Betty: It's the weather! It's hot! Wear a T-shirt! It's hot! (Focus Group 4)

Indeed, assumed heterosexuality (of students and teachers) was a frequent source of humour.[4] Participants also recognized problems with sexual images and were sometimes willing to challenge other participants' sexist comments, again through humor.

> Bob: [Girl's name] is the slut. Like she'll come to school and she'll wear /
> Bee: It doesn't matter what she /
> I: Why is that ok, to say that?
> Bee: Bob!
> Bob: . . . she'll come to school one day she'll /
> Fergie: That doesn't mean that they're a slut!
> Bob: When you give a guy a blow job at the age of 9 /
> Bee: You don't *believe* that??!
> Fergie: Do you have a primary resource for that? Were you there first hand? [silly voice] "Oh my god did you see that! Oh my god, I'm watching it right now!" [everyone laughing]. (Focus Group 6)

This indirect form of resistance (Scott, 1990; Simpson, 2000) can potentially provide a safe context for criticism, for it can be hard to pin down. Yet, part of its slipperiness is that it often challenges and reproduces normative assumptions at the same time.

There were also a number of instances in which their critique was linked to action. Participants in Focus Group 1 resisted the rules through breaking them, for instance, by wearing short shirts or bandanas and hoping that the principal would not see them. Girls in Focus Group 5 not only noticed that a bigger girl was more likely to find her dress regulated but also were openly critical with administration to address such hypocrisy. Occasionally, there is even evidence of more overt resistance, though notably the following example involves boys' dress. In the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender,

two-spirited, and queer and questioning (LGBTQ) focus group, participants discussed an occasion when a boy was suspended for wearing a skirt to school. In this school, which is well-known for its arts programs, a number of boys came to the school wearing skirts in response. Allison recognized this as a form of solidarity and resistance:

> So I mean a lot of the students will stick together. They're like "hey, wait a second, something's not right" you know. And they do good things like that, where they're like "hey, let's do something about it." (Focus Group 8)

More individually, Nicole (Focus Group 3) unsuccessfully challenged her administration when she was asked to change her home-made, shredded outfit on the basis that it was not revealing, and Sammie (Focus Group 7) successfully fought back on religious grounds when her principal asked her to remove her headscarf. None of these forms of challenge were about the acceptability of revealing dress in itself, however. Indeed, on this question these young women were quite conservative.

Reproduction and the Location of Self

The previous section considered how and when female students were critical of the dress codes and their enforcement. Although discussions of codes addressing appropriate dress often began with such critique of the codes and their inconsistent enforcement, these comments were frequently set starkly against concomitant hostility against other girls' revealing dress and a consequent appreciation of dress codes. This section now considers this investment in the dress codes and how their regulation of other girls' dress in part reflects their own gendered self-creation.

The language of the dress codes in themselves (Raby, 2005), sex education curricula (van Vliet & Raby, 2008), some elements of popular media (Levy, 2005), and parents and teachers (Chambers et al., 2004; Renold, 2005) all reinforce the language of respectability and reputation. Many comments within the focus groups reflect such popular talk and anxiety about young women's provocative dress.[5] Even dress codes themselves produce reference points for students in their regulation of other girls' dress. An example of this arises in girls' use of the language of self-respect.

> I: What does that mean, "something degrading to themselves"?
> Crystal: Uh, whorish.
> [Laughing]

Allison: Basically, "I have no self-respect, I'm going to flaunt myself in the hope of feeling loved." (Focus group 1)

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Liz: You don't respect yourself then you're not respecting anyone else. (Focus Group 6)

Liz's statement, in particular, is an almost verbatim reproduction of local, institutional language of dress codes, which commonly refer to self-respect. Through the language of self-respect, schools participate directly in the production of both gendered and sexualized identities. This emphasis on self-respect disciplines and individualizes bodies. Thus, if students who wear provocative dress are considered to lack self-respect, then responsibility for their marginalization is their own, rather than located in the social control of female sexuality or slut-bashing from others. These young women in turn reproduce such wider structures in their own commentaries, suggesting merit to the literature that suggests that girls are socialized into patriarchy. Several groups also cited the importance of appropriate dress in an educational environment and the preparation of students for future work, explanations cited within codes of conduct.

Barbara: Why would you need to attract that kind of attention at school? I mean like who—like who are you there to impress when you're there for, like . . . education? (Focus Group 4)

In this sense, schools participate directly in the production of both gendered and sexualized identities (Kehily, 2004).

As well as embracing the language of the rules, the girls frequently embraced their sentiment. Despite disputes with minor dress code details, most group participants at some point lamented girls' revealing dress.

Nicole: For me it's disturbing. Like "great, you're wearing a thong, show it to your boyfriend, show it to someone who cares." (Focus Group 3)

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Janice: But if you are walking around with a tank top that just covers your boobs then, you know you should probably put a [sweater] on [everyone laughs]. I would kind of be disgusted if I saw you [Marc says "yeah"] and probably make fun of you behind your back. (Focus Group 1)

Dress codes were valued for the very reason that they regulate girls' clothing and bodily exposure. During analysis, these moments stood out as frequently quite hostile toward girls who were seen to wear revealing clothing.

In five different groups, such hostility was evident through the choices of language: certain clothing was described as whorish, slutty, disgusting, disturbing, and wrong. Such sleaziness was explained as resulting from girls' desires to get boyfriends, their attempts to be cool and trendy, and their fashion incompetence. These comments also extended beyond the school:

> [In reaction to a girl wearing a very short skirt on Canada Day,]
> Catherine: I thought it was a belt—I like literally shouted out "whoa, whoa."
> Janice: But she left and changed, she went back home and changed 'cause everyone was waiting for her to come out. (Focus Group 1)

Despite such peer regulation, many focus-group participants felt the need for formal dress codes, to not only control the behavior of other girls but also to help young women avoid either sexual or peer harassment:

> Bee: 'Cause [the rules are] preventing that.
> I: Preventing what?
> Bee: They're trying to keep you safe.
> //
> Liz: What it is, is that, if you wear something like, ok well, if she's wearing something and her boobs are showing, other girls are gonna be calling her names like a slut or a whore. (Focus Group 6)

Overall, girls' dress was dominantly framed by these participants as individually problematic and inviting harassment.

As illustrated, these young women participate, sometimes quite wholeheartedly, in regulating dress: They seemed eager to discuss the dress codes, to frequently concur with the spirit of them, and to even enjoy criticizing other girls' revealing dress choices. Although this section is framed around the girls' acceptance of the rules and their reproduction of a narrow regulation of other girls' clothing, it is not intended to suggest that these girls passively reproduce a patriarchal framework. Respondents can be theorized as engaged social agents nonetheless, as they create themselves within structures and inequalities. As Driscoll (2002) argued,

> Feminine adolescence is a set of discourses on self-monitoring—on analyzing yourself in relation to other girls to identify and verify the kind of a girl you are and your relations to dominant models for women and femininity. (p. 169)

Driscoll adopts the view that it is through interaction that the self, a gendered self, is produced; our selves are socially embedded and we participate

in producing gendered power relations within diverse contexts. As Butler stated, "the norm only persists as a norm to the extent that it is acted out in social practice and reidealized and reinstituted in and through the daily social rituals of bodily life" (2004, p. 48).

From this position, girls draw on regulating, gendered discourses not only to jockey for power but also to define themselves and to indicate their skill in recognizing the safe side of the fine line between attractive and unacceptable. Indeed, these conversations seemed to include a degree of pleasure in this recognition. In these conversations, the girls could show their skill in deploying gendered discourses to locate themselves and "displace practices that do not concur with their collectively defined femininity" (Kehily, 2004, p. 209). Nicole (Focus Group 3), for example, supported her own reputation with her peers and the researcher after criticizing the details of school dress codes by making it clear that she is not saying that anything goes: "Oh man, on dress codes I just totally thought of this example. I actually think I have to agree now there should be some sort of dress code." She proceeded to provide examples of a girl exposing a thong and another wearing extremely low-riding pants. Othering secures belonging (Hey, 1997), particularly within a context of fear, for example, of failing in the face of a challenging bodily standard, or of erring oneself on the side of revealing too much. Othering is thus one strategy (among others) to illustrate one's own social, gender, and fashion competence. If we consider young people's construction of self in peer groups and we recognize that this construction is related to that of others (Tanenbaum, 1999), then positioning other girls as sluts helps to prevent the label from being attached to themselves. One other focus group moment hit home this othering process. In Focus Group 4, several girls talked about rules which they follow:

> Marjory: I don't wear, like, skanky clothing or . . . I wear appropriate clothing.
> Betty: I follow the dress code, but that's just the way I dress, so it's not like I'm doing it intentionally or anything.

Marjory defines her own dress as appropriate in contrast to skanky clothing, thus defining herself as normal. Betty gestures toward the familiarity of a habitus that matches her school's.[6]

Emphasis on a forced gaze was a recurring othering strategy evident in these focus groups. In their evaluation of other girls' revealing dress, respondents commented that they felt that there was no where else to look:

> Marjory: I like the dress code ones a lot 'cause I don't appreciate the girls wearing like . . . [group agreeing] the midriff and the thong. I don't like seeing that. (Focus Group 4)
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> **
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> Lana: I don't feel like staring at someone's butt. (Focus Group 4)
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> **
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> Nicole: This girl that was in my tech class in Grade 9. We all sat on stools and she'd sit in front of me and she'd pull her thong out of her pants, so you could see it when she sat down. I'm just like [look of surprise]. And then I'd ask her "could you not do that," and she's like "look somewhere else!" It's like "where else do you look?" [chuckles] There! (Focus Group 3)

These findings suggest that bodily displays are meant for someone else, specifically boys (who are consequently distracted). This positioning locates the speaker as straight, as invested in the regulation of displays of femininity and the female body and as focused on other things, including school. Orenstein (1994) argued that as girls come of age they learn to suppress their sexuality and convert it into disgust, projecting that disgust onto others. Certainly, my focus-group participants expressed disgust and similarly divided themselves from others, in this case in response to quite specific performances of gender and sexuality through clothing. This response can be interpreted as an illustration of gender performance and self-constitution, as well as the perpetuation of gender inequality (Brown, 2003; Hey, 1997).

Girls' regulation of other girls' self-presentations was most evident in their use of terms such as slut and "whorish." Such regulation reproduces gender inequalities by narrowing ideas of acceptable female sexuality and policing anything considered excess. Such comment may also reflect more complex meanings than direct peer gender regulation, however, when we account for the multiple uses of terms such as slut or slag (Kitzinger, 1995). Kitzinger's (1995) work is helpful here for she identifies three distinct uses of the word slag. In her analysis of young women's conversations about sexual reputations, Kitzinger found that the "slag as other" is used to address someone else, someone who wears tasteless and provocative clothing, is considered unattractive, and seen to be lacking in self-respect. This meaning seemed common to many of the disparaging comments raised within the focus groups, and I have discussed how such portrayals reflect school dress codes themselves and are in part about locating oneself as acceptable. The "slag as other" reinforces a hierarchy of respectability and places responsibility for crossing the line of acceptability firmly on the other, despite the class and cultural inflections behind such terms such as *tasteless*.

A less obvious interpretation is the "slag as everyone." Kitzinger (1995) argued that this interpretation recognizes that sometimes the label slag can be attached to any woman based on events beyond her control (including rape). This reputation then brings added vulnerability as such a woman has lost her power to negotiate sexual access. Examples of this position were less clear-cut in the focus groups, but evident nonetheless. There were two instances addressing dress codes as protecting girls from the dangers of harassment, suggesting an understanding of "slag as everyone."

> Maggie: I think that has something to do with gender too, you know the guys looking at girls in that kind of way and that might result in, like, sexual harassment or something like that. (Focus Group 1)

As cited above, Focus Group 6 also discussed the need for dress codes to teach girls to be careful, although here dress codes were seen to protect girls from the judgment of other girls.[7] Discussion of the gendered inequalities in dress code enforcement, the fine line between acceptable and unacceptable dress, and the potential sexualization of girls by male teachers also indirectly gestured toward the gendered inequalities beneath the position of "slag as everyone." These examples, on one hand, suggest individualization of responsibility but, on the other hand, point to wider dangers all girls face.

The final category Kitzinger (1995) identified is the "real slag," someone who allows herself to be used, embracing her own exploitation. Such a person is seen as giving up her own power and self-respect. Allison illustrates this distinction:

> I think there's "respectable" in a mini skirt. You walk around in it, you're confident; you're not wearing it for the sake of attention, but you're wearing it because, hey, you like a miniskirt. But then there's the whole, you know, "if I wear this short skirt, I'm going to have this guy look at my ass and yay!" I think that's not respectable. (Focus Group 8)

This comment, notably made within the focus group of LGBTQ youth, was one of the only ones, in any group, to acknowledge the potential pleasure of wearing revealing clothes and linking such pleasure to self-confidence. It was also one of the only comments to suggest that observers should consider a girl's own motivations for dressing as she does. This gesture toward girls' positive self-determination is brief, however, and if the girl is sexually confident, with a male's gaze in mind, then her dress is problematic.

Kitzinger (1995) believed these distinctions suggest that when women talk about slags they are not simply reproducing patriarchy but trying to

distinguish a powerful sexuality (as in pop star Madonna) from girls' vulnerability to exploitation, victimization, and shame "in the absence of an acceptable feminist vocabulary" (p. 194) suggesting that there is more to the deployment of this term than only condemnation.

Some researchers suggest that such a powerful sexuality is being embraced when girls dress provocatively (White, 2002) or enjoy the freedom, challenge, and/or individuality that can come with embracing the term slut (Tanenbaum, 1999). We have seen that a few comments from the girls come close to this position, Allison's temporary celebration of a miniskirt or Nicole's reference to individuality and freedom of expression, but these are at the same time undermined through discourses of self-respect and chaste femininity or hidden behind discourses of practicality. Levy (2005) suggested that the power of provocative dress is an empty form of power as it fulfills a consumerist and patriarchal script; yet, such an analysis continues to problematize girls' and women's bodies and choices (Duits & van Zoonen, 2006). Kitzinger's (1995) typology complicates our understanding of the word slag, suggesting that it is sometimes used as a substitute for talk about gendered inequalities and reminding us that provocative dress can have multiple meanings, including ones associated with power. What seems most evident in these focus groups, however, is a missing discourse of desire (Tolman, 2002) where there is little if any room for girls to openly speak of themselves as sexual beings.

Discussion

There are several analytic points arising from this investigation that I wish to emphasize. The first is to foreground the challenging fine line girls negotiate between what is acceptable, expected, and attractive and what is seen to go too far. This distinction is a challenge because it is constantly in flux, based on specific contexts, changing fashions, girls' own changing ages, and definitions of taste that vary by culture and class. It is also a challenge because the stakes are so high. Being considered attractive and desirable can bring a girl popularity and acceptance, whereas being considered overly sexual or sleazy can bring hostility and ostracism (Tanenbaum, 1999). These findings belie Levy's (2005) argument that girls are currently embracing raunch culture and instead resonate with arguments that suggest that a sexual double standard remains and that girls risk their reputations with each other, with boys, and even with school staff when they err on the side of being too revealing. It is telling that as part of the girls' need to position themselves as

safely acceptable, girls' desire seems largely absent, despite these girls' direct attacks on blatant sexism from both teachers and peers.

Furthermore, to most of these students, normative gender and hetero-sexuality were reproduced and considered mutually constitutive, both when critiquing and supporting the rules; being feminine is about attraction to boys, and masculine boys are attracted to girls. Boys and girls wear differ-ent kinds of clothing and it is, for the most part, girls' clothing that is prob-lematic for being revealing and distracting. Interestingly, the sexual nature of the clothing per se received less comment, either positive or negative, than concern with what was revealed and how such exposure affects others. Many participants were uncomfortable with girls' sexual bodies or exposed flesh within the classroom. For the most part, boys' (hetero)sexuality was only relevant when respondents were concerned that boys were distracted by girls' provocative clothing, a position holding girls responsible for boys' sexual desires (Duits & van Zoonen, 2006).

Finally, these processes are not clear-cut. These young women reproduced sexual double standards but also challenged them. Like adults, they were frequently contradictory in their comments. Certain forms of sexism were condemned and yet sexism was accepted and reproduced. Skimpy clothing was contextualized and explained, and yet certain girls were deemed sleazy. There was some attempt to discuss boys' presentation of self and regulation of dress, but for the most part, boys could not also be sluts. Clearly, chal-lenges are at the same time reproductive of the status quo. It is therefore difficult to describe these girls as merely reproducing the patriarchal struc-tures that surround them, nor as easily embracing their own sexual agency.

Conclusion

This article has drawn on understandings of young people as engaged participants within their peer cultures and in their negotiation of wider social structures, even in their frequent reproduction of them. These com-ments resonate with understandings of children as social actors who can create meaning and interpret it (Christensen & Prout, 2005; James & Prout, 1990). Also reflecting the performance of gender and sexuality (Butler, 1990), I have illustrated young women's reactions to, and negotia-tions of, school dress codes as complex: challenging, reproductive, negoti-ated, and strategically used. Overall, we can see that young women are navigating a structural environment not of their own choosing, one strongly influenced by the double standards of normative gender and heterosexual-ity. They participate in perpetuating gender inequalities, yet within this

environment, they are also knowledgeable and strategic participants who will challenge certain inequalities.

Some limitations to this research also indicate future avenues to pursue. Although focus groups provide an excellent forum for learning about public talk and meaning-making among peers, they do not capture more private views (Mitchell, 1999). Although respondents had the opportunity to provide private written comments, individual interviews may have allowed for more confidential material to arise. Similarly, a study more directly concentrated on the topic of dress codes, rather than school rules in general, would provide for more detailed discussion and consequent analysis. For example, a robust analysis of dress codes ideally addresses intersections of class and race, yet neither was sufficiently addressed in the focus groups to warrant conclusions.

Class is arguably an important factor within the regulation of girls' dress. This variable has been examined within school rules (Raby, 2005) and between girls (Hey, 1997; McRobbie, 1978), with slut seen as more likely to be applied to working-class girls (Tanenbaum, 1999). Victor (2004) discussed the racist and classist overtones of the term slut as it is used by lower-class American teenage girls as a sweeping term used to denigrate others. Robinson (1992) similarly found that Australian teachers felt that acceptable behavior for young women "stemmed from middle class values that had little relevance for girls from working class backgrounds" (p. 81). Working-class girls' challenge to the image of a good girl was seen by the teachers as problematic. Unfortunately, although some potential class differences between focus groups and participants were evident within my data, available information was not sufficient for a conclusive analysis. Furthermore, class arose rarely in participants' comments. Some clothes were described as trashy, and class was thought to affect fashion:

> Betty: Well [girls who wear skimpy clothes] just don't get that not all fashions are good. [Yeahs from group.] You know, there's a reason only rich people can afford these things. (Focus Group 4)

Another respondent felt that uniforms would prevent wealthier students from harassing poorer ones. These comments suggest that working-class girls are more vulnerable to such challenges to reputation, underscoring the need for more research.

Similarly, these focus groups produced little on culture and race. In the United States, Victor (2004) and White (2002) found that White girls were called sluts if they had sex with Black men. In an ethnographic study of girls in Vancouver, Pomerantz (2006) noted that hoochie was a racialized replacement for skank (aka slut) in reference to Hispanic girls. Yet, White

(2002) argued that the condemnation of sluts does not occur in the same way within groups of Black or Latino girls where girlfriends do not abandon friends who are labeled sluts, and there is more room to talk about liking sex. Allusions to race occasionally arose in my almost-entirely-White focus groups when discussing the "stupid" style of boys wearing baggy pants, a style associated with hip-hop and skater cultures. Focus Group 3 discussed cultural differences. Yet, other than this there was silence. Interestingly, one of the groups that was least inclined to discuss and denigrate girls' revealing dress was the group of new immigrant youth.

The importance of age also requires further study. In research on younger girls, this fine line between attractive and sleazy is evident, although it seems to be negotiated a little differently. In Renold's (2005) study of junior school girls, she found the girls to be much more open about their desire to look sexy, and even tarty, although they recognized that one doesn't want to look too tarty. Within my focus groups, age was raised in two groups, with the suggestion that it is in middle school that there is more pressure to dress provocatively to be cool, whereas it is in the older grades of secondary school that those who dress provocatively are criticized.

Others' work on girls' policing of each others' reputations has argued that interventions need to occur. Tanenbaum (1999) contended that young women need positive, supportive spaces for females to address common issues. She believed that such an opportunity would dissipate the intensity of competition and slut policing. Hird and Jackson (2001) argued that young women and men need access to feminist discourses rather than trying to deal with these issues with an insufficient, individualized vocabulary. Kitzinger (1995) also noted the need for a vocabulary beyond slut or slag to talk about reputation, exploitation, and sexuality. Finally, Tolman (2002) argued that we need to recognize girls as desiring subjects.

These are important goals and all particularly challenging within wider institutional structures that fit so well with girls' self-policing and a broader culture of mixed messages around girls' dress. Many school dress codes themselves, how they are explained and how they are policed, perpetuate an atmosphere wherein girls who dress provocatively are deemed problematic and potentially inviting abuse (Pomerantz, 2007). Such institutional reproduction of normative gender and sexuality require intervention. There is also value to including and enforcing rules against sexism and homophobia (as some schools do). Similarly, sexual health education curriculum needs attention so that it provides a forum for young people to discuss sexism, gender inequality, double standards, unacceptable speech, and girls' desire (van Vliet & Raby, 2008). Ultimately, of course, much wider change is needed: to imagine a society wherein girls' sexuality is acceptable, where

girls are able to negotiate sexual and gender relations from a location of power, and where the deep, normative, gendered inequalities that we see reflected in the data for this article are displaced.

Appendix
Focus Group Details

1. Youth centre	Drop-in centre in a small city
	Participants were White
	15-17 years; five girls and two boys
	Economic backgrounds unavailable
2. Street youth	Conducted at a drop-in and shelter for street youth in a small city
	Participants were primarily White
	16-21 years; 4 female and 10 male participants
	Economically marginalized youth
3. Performing arts	Members of an organized performing arts group in a small city
	All participants were White
	One 13-year-old, others 16-17; three girls, one boy
	Middle- to upper-class professional parents
4. French group	Participants located through word of mouth. All attending a public French school
	All participants White
	Aged 15-18; four girls
	Working-class parents (trades and service industry)
5. Catholic group	Participants located through word of mouth. All attending public Catholic school
	All participants White
	Aged 17-18; two girls, 2 boys
	Middle-class, professional parents
6. Boys and Girls Club	Drop-in centre for young people located in a small city
	All participants White
	Aged 13-16; four girls, 2 boys
	Economically marginalized
7. New immigrant group	Weekly program for new immigrant youth in a small city
	One participant from Latin American, two from North Africa, one from East Africa, and the remaining three were also non-White
	Aged 15-18; two girls, five boys
	Working- and middle-class parents
8. LGBTTQ group	Weekly group for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, two-spirited, and queer and questioning teens
	Seven White, one Black, one Asian youth
	Aged 15-19; five male and four female participants
	Across range of class backgrounds

Notes

1. The transcription code "/" indicates interruption by the next speaker.

2. It is interesting in this exchange that even though Betty disagreed with the other two girls her disagreement is presented as if she is in agreement, suggesting a desire to downplay conflict within the group.

3. A case in Langley, British Columbia, revolved around this very issue. A young woman was sent home for wearing an inappropriate tank top. The principal and various reporters noted, however, that this top was particularly revealing on this specific girl because of her breast size. Pomerantz (2007) critically examined this case, discussing how such dress codes patrol the borders of femininity and delineate acceptability. Pomerantz astutely observed that this was not a dress code violation but a corporeal violation.

4. There were also a few instances of overt homophobia. For example, it was mockingly suggested in Focus Group 6 that any boy wearing tight clothing must be gay.

5. In the case of teachers, Chambers, van Loon, and Tinknell (2004); Tanenbaum (1999); and White (2002) all suggested that teachers have frequently been silent in reaction to reputation-based bullying of girls. Chambers et al. (2004) found that British teachers are unconcerned about boys' sexuality but worry that girls' sexual awareness reflects promiscuity. My own recent interviews with school staff about school rules reflect a similar, as yet unpublished, pattern. Most approved of dress codes for the specific purpose of regulating girls' inappropriate outfits.

6. A number of dress codes use terms like *appropriate dress*, implying a shared understanding of what appropriate dress means, even though such a definition reflects class, ethnicity, religion, and so on (Raby, 2005). When students position themselves as dressing normally, or other girls as being skanky, this is done within peer groups that are also embedded in such unequal identity locations. For example, Bettis and Adams (2003) found that normative understandings of what it means to be a cheerleader in fact reflected racialized, class-based beliefs.

7. Pomerantz (2007) defined this as the help discourse evident in the role of school administrations that present dress codes as protecting girls who "do not know enough to protect themselves" (p. 18), consequently framing these girls as passive and unknowing.

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