

THE EFFECTS OF MASS MEDIA IMAGES AND THEIR MESSAGES  
ON ADOLESCENT FEMALES

By

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A CAPSTONE PROJECT PRESENTED TO THE COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS OF THE  
UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR  
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2013



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Summary of Capstone Project Presented to the College of Fine Arts of the University of Florida  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

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April 2013

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### Abstract

“The Effects of Mass Media Images and their Messages on Adolescent Females” looks at messages about “being female” that are perpetuated by various mass media proliferated images, and how those messages may affect adolescent females’ sense of self-value and well-being. My study attempts to answer the questions, “In what ways do stereotypical, sexualized media-proliferated images of females as youthful, slim, perfect, and sexualized effect adolescent females?” and “In what ways have I experienced and come to understand these kinds of images?” I examine scholarly research on the topics of media messages and female adolescent health and wellness; and I share my own experiences and insights as a young female raised in a media-saturated, beauty-focused environment. A review of research on media influences on female adolescent development indicates concerns about the negative impact of stereotypical images of females in relation to female self-image and sexuality. My own experiences confirm such concerns. My blog share my own experiences of images and inquiries about such images (<http://30daysofmediamessages.blogspot.com>). My Scoop.it site is an archive of studies I have collected and annotated concerning this topic <http://www.scoop.it/t/ashley-s-art-education-scoops#curate>. I also took original images about and for females from my daily life, images that raise issues also noted in research about the impact of images on females’ sense of self-worth. My Pinterest board collection of these problematic images of and about females that I have encountered over the past 2 months is found at <http://pinterest.com/ashleydawngreer/visual-culture-media-messages-girl-world-uf-capsto/>. Based on these images and my research, I created a Mashup video, available at (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S1o5MYe90lY>). I also included some of these images on my website created for this project. My website serves as a central site and repository to share my research and link to all of these sites

(<http://mediamessagesandyoungfemales.webs.com>). This capstone paper describes the research project, procedures I followed, and my findings, reflections, and recommendations.

### **Introduction**

“The Effects of Media Messages on Young Adolescent Females” looks at mass media messages perpetuated by images proliferated in various media outlets, and how those messages may affect young adolescent females. As a mentor to youth and adolescents in my community, I have observed first hand how certain kinds of images in visual culture perpetuate particular feelings and behaviors directly related to aspects of female life such as self image, self value, and sexuality. The availability and proliferation of images in digital media exaggerates this effect. It is my belief that the images in everyday visual culture have an enormous impact on the development of female adolescents today’s society.

I first noticed this impact in a big way when I was responsible for a group of adolescent (11-15 years old) girls on a youth retreat down to the beach. It was a trip sponsored by the church, so I had already had a discussion with the group about dressing modestly (one-piece swimsuits, t-shirts, no short-shorts) and also about making sure our attitudes and behaviors represented our church, no matter what other youth groups were wearing or doing. I was surprised at the responses I received, these girls wanted to wear their bikinis, tank tops, and short shorts to the beach “because it would be hot”. It was obvious to me the temperature had nothing to do with it, but these girls wanted to look good for the thousands of other adolescents and teens that would be on this trip. I was firm in my decision, however, when we arrived at the beach there were numerous occasions where we all had to wait while I sent a girl back in the hotel to change into something ‘more appropriate’. I couldn’t believe what a big deal they were making about the dress code implemented for a Christian teen conference! I was also shocked by the

amount of time most of these girls wanted to take to ‘primp’ in the mornings before worship. I thought back to when I was their age and I could not remember being that concerned with getting dolled up in the morning, especially at the beach! Looking back now, I realize I probably was a terrible example for these young girls. As the adult in charge I was getting up even earlier in the morning to fix my hair and makeup before breakfast.

Besides the impact I have observed during my time as a mentor to youth and adolescent females in my community, I have also become more aware of the impact that visual culture and multi-media messages have had on me personally. As a female in my mid-to-late twenties, I have grown up in a world where I am constantly bombarded with messages about what it means to be female in today’s society. Working eight years in the beauty industry intensified my exposure to these messages, much like the growth of technology and media availability have intensified these messages to youth in today’s world. My research on images and their messages has given me new insight to what effect these messages have had on me personally. In this Capstone Research project, I offer a visual and narrative account of my own experiences of media messages about being female. My review of relevant research on media messages and female’s sense of self-value allows me to develop insights that further inform my autobiographical stories and make sense of them.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Images in visual culture and mass media hugely affect adolescent culture. Advancements in media technologies have expanded enormously the number of images appearing in media devices, sites, and experiences available. Adolescents have greater access to these media and the images they carry than ever before. Ultimately, I argue here that a media-literate populace should result in a more responsive and responsible media industry and a culture that nurtures healthy

lifestyles. Absent such responsibilities on the part of industries and the culture at large, it remains our responsibility as adults, educators, and parents to educate young people about how to be critical consumers of popular images found within mass media.

### **Purpose or Goals of the Study**

My study examines contemporary research that looks at effects on adolescent female development of images commonly found in mass media. By examining studies on the extent to which peer/media/cultural influence effects female adolescent development, I hope to establish a need for engaging youth in understanding and navigating these effects through media literacy programs. It is my desire that other educators will be able to use my research as a springboard for such engagements in their classrooms.

### **Rationale and Significance of the Study**

This study is needed to establish the importance of media literacy in the classroom. It is important to recognize that contemporary media-proliferated images are an important source of influence in young peoples' lives, especially females, and that it is the responsibility of adults to help young people become knowledgeable users of the media that surrounds them.

### **Assumptions**

It is my assumption that in today's society, an adolescent female's current and emerging sense of self is strongly affected by the visual culture and media they are exposed to. I believe that a comprehensive media literacy program in schools would result in more responsible media consumption and an all around healthier adolescent female community.

## Definitions of Terms

**Visuality:** Sidney Walker, author of “Artmaking in an Age of Visual Culture: Vision and Visuality“, defines visuality as “the sum of discourses that inform how we see” (Walker, 2004, p. 74). Visuality refers to the “socialization of vision”, which is a network of cultural meanings generated from various discourses that shape the social practices of vision (Walker, 2004, p. 75).

**Interstanding:** In “Wrestling with Angels, Searching for Ghosts: Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Visual Culture”, art educator Kevin Tavin introduces the term “Interstanding” or the process of “operating on and through theory in order to set yourself and the world in question” (Tavin, 2004, p. 3). Interstanding allows students to critique pop culture to (re)construct meaning and develop agency for promoting social justice and encourages multiple and contradictory interpretations of popular culture that refuse a static notion of truth (Tavin, 2004).

**Media Literacy:** Media literacy is defined as “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and communicate messages in a variety of forms” (Hobbs, 1997, p. 7). New media literacies "equip young people with the social skills and cultural competencies required to become full participants in an emergent media landscape and raise public understanding about what it means to be literate in a globally interconnected, multicultural world" (Delacruz, 2009). (See also Project New Media Literacies, n. d., ¶ 1, cited in Delacruz, 2009). Such literacies "involve social skills developed through collaboration and networking. These skills build on the foundation of traditional literacy, research skills, technical skills, and critical analysis skills taught in the classroom," and include behaviors such as "play, performance, simulation, appropriation, multitasking, distributed cognition, judgment, transmedia navigation, networking, and negotiation" (Delacruz, 2009). (See also Jenkins, et al., 2007, pp, 3-4, cited in Delacruz, 2009).

**Visual Culture:** In “Wrestling With Angels, Searching for Ghosts: Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Visual Culture” Kevin Tavin describes visual culture as a “field of study that analyzes and interprets how visual experiences are constructed within social systems, practices, and structures” (Tavin, 2004, p. 1).

**Adolescence:** The *Encyclopedia of Psychology* defines adolescence as a transitory period, during which an individual is experiencing a considerable amount of change in regard to his or her individual and contextual domains (Lerner, R. M., Boyd, M. J., & Du, D., 2010). Adolescence may be defined as the period in life when most of a person’s biological, cognitive, psychological, and social characteristics are changing in an interrelated manner from what is considered childlike to what is considered adult like (Lerner, R. M., Boyd, M. J., & Du, D., 2010).

### **Limitations of the Study**

Although research findings substantiate that media plays a role in diverse facets of at risk behavior and adjustment in the areas of violence and substance abuse, these areas are outside the scope of this study. Also, while media messages have an impact on both male and female adolescents, for this study I focused mainly on girls. Finally, this study was intended to set up and establish a need for media literacy education in the classroom. Specific media literacy curricular units of study, a logical next step, are beyond the specific scope of my research.

## **Literature Review**

### **The Effects of Visual Culture and Media Technology on Adolescent Development**

Advertising across various industries and media outlets is an important area where images and their meanings are intentionally shaped to create both a sense of desire and a sense of

void in individuals, thus spurring them to buy particular products to address those desires and sense of void. Television and reality shows create illusions about how others may live. Even music is a means of communicating messages about life to a mass audience. All of these forms of communication create meaning. With the mass media becoming a major source from which the current young people in US society gets daily information concerning products, life stories, and entertainment, it is wise to think critically about the messages they are conveying to us. This study is aimed to prospectively analyze published research that examines the role of media influences in young adolescent females in the areas of self-image, self-esteem, and sexuality.

### **What is Visual Culture?**

Developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky believed that in the process of development the child not only masters the items of cultural experience but the habits and forms of cultural behavior and the cultural methods of reasoning (John-Steiner, n.d.). Current scholars would recognize that Vygotsky is talking in part about popular or everyday visual culture. Art educator Sydney Walker observes that visual culture has a huge impact on how students develop artistically and how they learn to “see”, that is, how they develop their visuality or “socialization of vision” (Walker, 2004, p. 75). How young people see things impacts how they understand themselves and others. Thus, in this view, visual culture has a direct impact on how adolescents develop views on topics that they are exposed to via media and technology. In “Wrestling With Angels, Searching for Ghosts: Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Visual Culture” art educator Kevin Tavin elaborates and extends this thesis to a need for change in art education. According to Tavin, visual culture as a “field of study that analyzes and interprets how visual experiences are constructed within social systems, practices, and structures” (Tavin, 2004, p.1). Tavin claims that an art education based “solely on creative self expression ideologies, or studying art works

exclusively from the museum realm, ignores the way that children and youth construct their ever-changing identities through popular culture” (Tavin, 2004, p. 1). Returning to Vygotsky’s views, popular visual culture is form of cultural behavior and a primary vehicle through which individuals are socialized to see in particular ways, construct particular meanings about the nature of life, and learn about themselves and others. I believe that what I refer to as *the mass media* in this study (as proliferated in advertising, TV, music, fashion, and entertainment industries, etc.) are significant aspects of one’s everyday visual culture and that it has a powerful impact on one’s cultural learning. Following Tavin’s and Walker’s advice, all of this necessitates changes in how art education is envisioned and taught.

### **Self Image and Self Esteem**

Researchers and mental health clinicians have long agreed that contemporary influences of the media are associated with the development of self-esteem in young females (Polce-Lynch, Myers, Klierer & Kilmartin, 2001). The study “The Contribution of Peer and Media Influences to the Development of Body Satisfaction and Self-Esteem in Young Girls: A Prospective Study” found that as early as school entry, girls appear to already live in a culture in which peers and the media transmit the thin ideal in a way that negatively influences their development of body image and self esteem (Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006). Some researchers go so far as to link these pressures with life threatening eating disorders in girls, including anorexia. Anorexia as a disease has long been theorized as an act of resistance against both controlling parents and the pressures of Western culture to be perfect, to be thin, and to be in control (Lewis, 2012) (See also Bordo, 1993, cited in Lewis, 2012). Pipher (1994, 1996) clinical work led her to scrutinize how media set unrealistic expectations of girls’ physical appearance (Polce-Lynch et al., 2001). This observation has been supported by media theorists and researchers, who also noted a recent trend

toward setting unrealistic expectations for boys (Polce-Lynch et al., 2001). (See also Kilbourne, 1996, cited in Polce-Lynch et al., 2001).

### Sexuality

A special report by CNN “Toddlers and Tiaras’ and Sexualizing 3 Year Olds” cites a February 2007 report from the American Psychological Association that found that girls’ exposure to the hyper sexualized media content can negatively impact their cognitive and emotional development; is strongly associated with eating disorders, low self-esteem and depression; leads to fewer girls pursuing careers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics; and causes diminished sexual health” (Henson, 2011, para 7). This trend continues into adolescence. According to the study “Sexual Messages in Teen’s Favorite Prime-Time Television Programs”, the television shows teens watch most frequently during prime time (8 pm to 11 pm EST) are full of talk about and depictions of sexual activity (Cope-Farrar & Kunkel, 2002). (See Figure 1.)

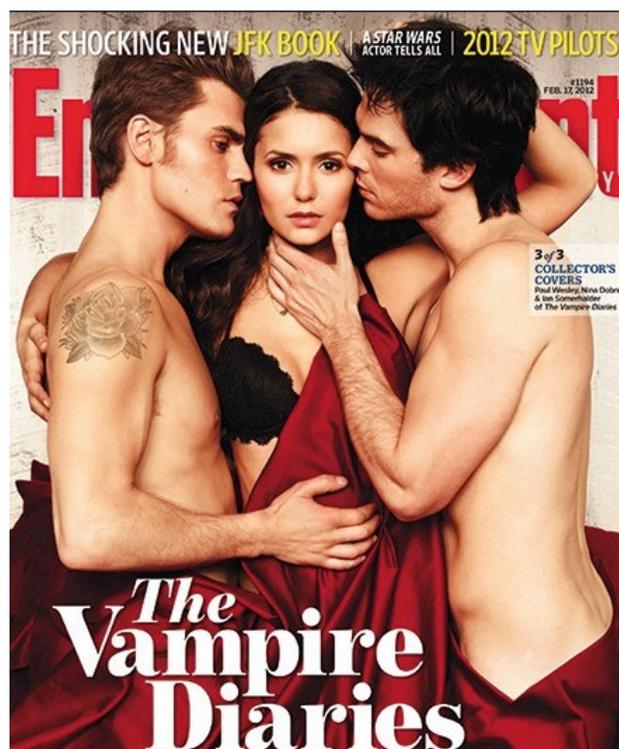
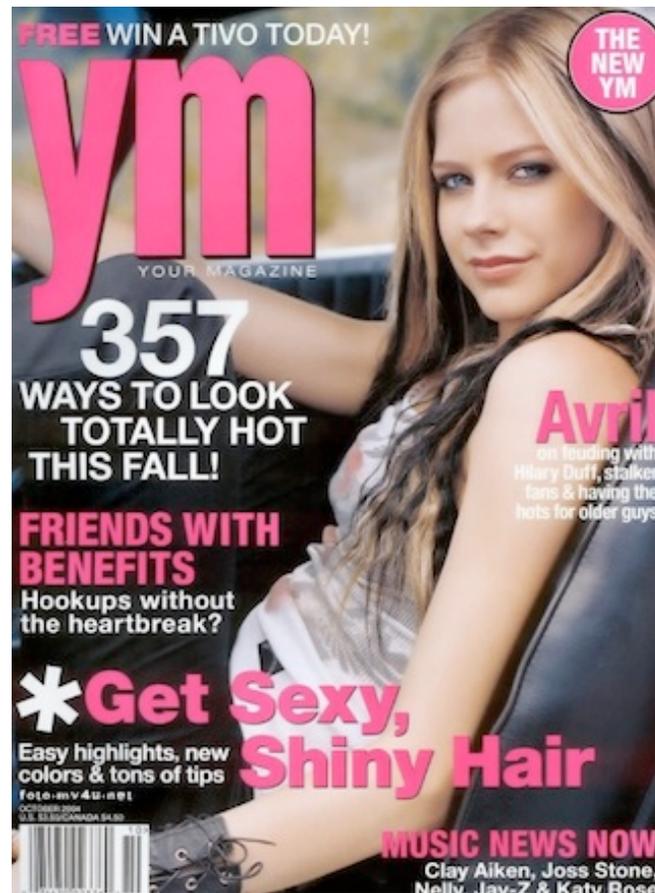


Figure 1: Magazine cover featuring teen show *The Vampire Diaries*.

The idea of sexual risks or responsibility is almost never talked about or shown and talk about or depictions of needing to wait or taking precautions occur in only about 5% of scenes portraying sexual behaviors (Cope-Farrar & Kunkel, 2002). Research has also found that talk shows that frequently feature dysfunctional couples, parent-child relations, marital relations and infidelity, other sexual relations, and sexual themes are another favorite television genre of teen audiences (Greenberg & Smith, 2002).

Music and music videos reinforce these negative messages for teens. Music and music videos popular with teens continue to be primarily about sex and sexuality, and become an especially important part of older teens media diets as they use the sounds and images to enhance their moods and learn more about themselves and youth culture (Arnett, 2002).

Similar to TV shows and music videos, magazines are an important part of most teen girls daily media diets. Analyses of teen girl magazines such as *Seventeen* and *Teen* reveal that they are designed primarily to tell girls that their most important function in life is to become sexually attractive enough to catch a desirable male (Peirce, 1995). The article “From ‘Just the Facts’ to ‘Downright Salacious’: Teens’ and Women’s Magazine Coverage of Sex and Sexual Health” observes that the same message (e.g., “What’s your lovemaking profile?” or “Perfect pickup lines: Never again let a guy get away because you can’t think of anything to say.”) is repeated even more explicitly in the women’s magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*, *Glamour*, and *Mademoiselle*, which many middle and late teen girls read (Walsh-Childers, Goff offer & Ringer-Lepre, 2002). One of the most comprehensive studies of teen girls’ and women’s magazines ever done shows that these magazines are indeed full of information about sexuality (Walsh-Childers, Goffhoffer & Ringer-Lepre, 2002). (See Figure 2.)



**Figure 2:** Teen magazine *YM (Young and Modern)* cover advertises contents such as “357 Ways to Look Totally Hot”, “Friends with Benefits”, and how to “Get Sexy Hair”.

The advertising industry further reinforces unhealthy attitudes and expectations. Tallim’s study “Sexualized Images in Advertising” describes that while it is not unusual in the fashion industry to see very young models setting standards of beauty, what is new is the emergence of highly eroticized portrayals of young women, as well as young men (Tallim, 2003). (See Figure 3.) With advertising decisions like these come negative consequences such as the common practice of objectifying and degrading women, and contributing to a negative and unhealthy self-image amongst young girls. As Tallim observes, “increased exposure to unrealistic sexualized role models- for both boys and girls- affects the self-esteem, body image, and expectations

regarding the appearance and behavior of the opposite sex” (Tallim, 2003, p. 7).



**Figure 3:** Image from high-fashion magazine spread portraying highly eroticized young girl

Thus far, this review has been concerned with ideas about female body image and sexualization, which I have positioned as different from healthy human sexuality. The American Psychological Association observes that there are several components to sexualization, which set it apart from healthy sexuality. Sexualization occurs when:

- A person's value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics;
- A person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy;
- A person is sexually objectified—that is, made into a thing for others' sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision-making;

and/or sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person. (Zurbriggen, 2007).

### **Media Literacy**

I have argued in my introduction that media literacy is needed in response to the aforementioned issues. Media literacy is defined as “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and communicate messages in a variety of forms” (Hobbs, 1997, p. 7). Across the country, local groups are working in schools and community centers teaching youth and parents to be more critical media consumers by showing them that media messages are constructed and can be deconstructed to uncover their assumptions and hidden values; messages are produced within economic, social, and political contexts; and that they can create media themselves (Thoman, 1998). So far, although more research is needed, evaluation studies have shown that children who are taught such concepts are less susceptible to the negative effects of subsequent media use (e.g., Austin & Johnson, 1997). The American Academy of Pediatricians issued policy statements on media effects, including sexuality and contraception, and has embraced media literacy as an important strategy for decreasing the negative effects of the media on youth (AAP, 1995). Their “Media Matters” campaign includes a media use inventory, which pediatricians are encouraged to have their young patients fill out and discuss with their parents. Increasing media literacy among parents and children will require significant resources to ensure that all who need it, get it.

### **What this Means for Art Education**

My arguments here are that a critical media literacy oriented visual culture approach in art education is needed to address the powerful influence of media on young people today. Two art educators in particular have suggested ways to engage. In “Wrestling with Angels, Searching for Ghosts: Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Visual Culture“, art educator Kevin Tavin describes

one way to do this. He introduces the term “Interstanding” or the process of “operating on and through theory in order to set yourself and the world in question” (Tavin, 2004, p. 3).

Interstanding allows students to critique pop culture to construct meaning and develop agency for promoting social justice. According to Tavin, using visual culture as a means to study popular culture to understand the sociology or politics of an image also allows a better understanding and appreciation of contemporary art and art that expresses ideas and opinions on social, political, gender, or race issues. A visual culture-oriented approach to art education would be composed of lessons that encouraged students to examine social and political issues in their community and explore those concepts and ideas through different forms of media and techniques. While visual culture lessons differ from traditional art lessons (because they focus more on popular visual culture and society and less on traditional fine art focuses such as principles and elements of design) it is expressed that a Visual Culture Art Education is more effective in helping “shape and regulate student’s understanding of themselves and the world” (Tavin, 2004, p. 1).

Walker suggests a slightly different approach to Tavin’s. In her article “Armaking in an Age of Visual Culture Vision and Visuality”, Walker (2004) notes that contemporary artists must contend with the fact that culture is profoundly affected by the proliferation and circulation of images. This is largely in part to the technological revolution that has taken place over the last decade. This technology also requires that artists understand the implications of producing artwork in a media-saturated culture. Walker examines how vision is socialized as *visuality* and what that might mean for art making in practice and in instruction (Walker, 2004). If students are to meaningfully engage visual culture for art making, they require knowledge and understanding of this nature to inform their own practice. Walker suggests that as students consider artist case

studies and art making related to vision in society, “it will be incumbent upon them to make the connections to their own practice” (Walker, 2004, p. 89).

### **Final thoughts about the Literature regarding Media influences on Females’ Sense of Self-value**

Overexposure to media messages in television shows, movies, music, advertisements, and the very activities that are suppose to be providing adolescents a healthy outlet, exposes kids to certain behaviors and ideals and then expects them not to act on them. Society expects adolescents to be mature enough to know what to do and how to handle this overwhelming and constant flow of information, however, adolescents do not instinctively understand these things. It is imperative for adults (especially parents and educators) to teach them about the world, and to know what is developmentally appropriate for them to be learning. Scholars have noted negative implications of an increased exposure to media messages. These implications include a decrease in adolescent’s cognitive and emotional development, increasing cases of eating disorders, low self-esteem and depression, and increased incidences of sexual harassment and violence.

A critical-analysis oriented visual culture perspective will enhance art education instruction in the classroom by encouraging students to consider the importance of media messages in our everyday life and how these messages affect our society, our culture, and our own personal ideals. Everything from advertisements and marketing, music videos, television shows, movies, media, and online social networks provide a constant bombardment of how we are supposed to look and appear to fit in and/or behave or appear normal. While most other subjects teach students to learn the right answer to a question, the art classroom provides an opportunity for students to explore information and develop their own opinion on the subject.

Visual culture art education encourages students to observe and analyze the different aspects of visual culture they are surrounded by daily and express their feelings and opinions on the issues.

Technology has definitely changed the art world, as well as the way we socialize and view society. This technological revolution affects youth even more, as youth are connected to technology more than anyone else in our society and are thus immersed in a variety of cultures and images. However, it is important that they understand the impact that this visual culture has, whether it is positive or negative. By introducing a curriculum that addresses visual culture education, students can begin to understand the importance of understanding media literacy and awareness, and visual literacy. Incorporating lessons that expose the impact of propaganda, visual culture, and media culture can help to better prepare students to process and understand the information they are exposed to instead of just absorbing it. As art educators, we are awarded the unique opportunity to explore issues of visual culture in the media. By teaching students how and why these messages are embedded in the media, they will be better prepared to consider the messages they are exposed to and maintain their own beliefs and ideas. Art educators need to pay attention to visual culture and find a way somehow to deal with its less desirable influences.

### **Methodology**

For my research I have examined studies and meta-analyses that deal with media impact on adolescent development. Meta-analyses are studies that summarize the results of other studies (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtler, 2006). The fundamental goal of meta-analytic procedures is the accumulation of evidence for the purpose of furthering understanding of past research and guiding future inquiry (Winner & Hetland, 2000). By examining studies on the extent to which peer/media/cultural influence affects adolescent development, I hope to establish an understanding of ways to engage youth in understanding and navigating these effects through

media literacy programs. It is my desire that based on my study, other educators will be convinced to engage a media literacy approach in their classrooms.

I also incorporated a narrative approach using a modified form of auto-ethnography, by telling my own stories about images of females, and how I experienced and understood these images. Telling one's own stories in research, also known as "narrative research" is typically categorized as an overarching category for a variety of contemporary research practices (Casey, 1995-1996) that privileges the voice of the narrator. Casey explains, "whether implicit or elaborated, every study of narrative is based on a particular understanding of the speaker's self" (Casey, 1995-1996, p. 213). Narrative research neither manipulates, nor obscures or marginalizes the voice of the researcher (Delacruz, 2011). This is precisely what I hoped to accomplish by adding my own personal life experiences to my research project.

### **Data Collection Procedures and Instrumentation**

My review of research began with examination of studies that explore media effects on adolescent's behavior and beliefs in the areas of self-image, self-esteem, and sexuality. This includes examinations of single studies and meta-analyses that provide findings across multiple studies in a comprehensive and systematic manner. "Meta-analytic syntheses do not intend to be the final word on a research area, but rather to clarify what has been learned thus far from the studies conducted and to determine what remains to be learned" (Winner & Hetland, 2000, p. 3). I searched for meta-analyses because of their expansive nature, their rigorous methodology, and their respect amongst researchers. I identified and reviewed meta-analyses and case studies that specifically examine media effects on adolescents and media literacy program results.

As mentioned before, I also describe my own personal experiences, reflections, critical analyses, and understandings as a mentor to adolescent females and as an art educator. This

includes collecting images that I have recently experienced in my daily life. Within my auto-ethnographic narratives, I embed research findings from my literature review into my stories.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

In qualitative research data analysis strategies include categorizing strategies (coding and thematic) and memos. According to Maxwell, coding in qualitative research consists of applying a pre-established set of categories to the data with the primary goal being to generate frequency counts of the items in each category (Maxwell, 2004). The items are then arranged into categories that facilitate comparison between things in the same category and that aid in the development of theoretical concepts (Maxwell, 2004). In my study I have adapted Maxwell's approach, looking for particular kinds of research writings and images of and about females, and then further identifying patterns and themes present in published studies, in my collected images, and in my own narratives.

### **Creative Products and Social Media Utilization**

My capstone project is published my website that houses all of my research and work. I have identified and compiled relevant studies into a Scoop.it archive that is accessible from my webpage. This will be convenient for associates and fellow teachers to further related topics they find especially interesting or concerning. I have also been taking photographs of my images of females that I typically see in my daily life, and I created a compilation of these visual images in Pinterest. I have annotated this Pinterest board and have made it public so that it will be easily accessible to the public, as well as linked to my webpage. Each annotation reflects my thoughts about the messages contained within these images. Throughout my research process and visual media compilations, I have also been blogging about my findings, experiences, feelings, and

insights relating to this study. Lastly, I created create a video ‘mash-up’ that incorporates all of the images and media I feel best illustrates my data. The video is published to YouTube as well as located on my webpage.

### **Limitations**

Although research findings substantiate that images play a role in diverse facets of at risk behavior and adjustment in the areas of violence and substance abuse, these areas will remain outside the scope of this study. Also, while media messages have an impact on both male and female adolescents, for this study I focused mainly on girls. While I am interested in the before mentioned areas of focus, I have a limited timespan allotted to conduct the study. I concentrated my focus on the effect of media messages on adolescent girls in the areas of self-esteem and sexuality. Finally, this study calls for but does not articulate specific media literacy educational interventions, other than a general framework that embraces a critical visual culture informed orientation.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **In the Beginning**

My study looked at media messages contained within images perpetuated by numerous media outlets and how those messages may affect adolescent females. This began my inquiry into other scholarly periodicals and online publications, as well as taking notice of visual imagery that I experience in my daily life. I found numerous articles and publications that examined the role of media influences in the development of body satisfaction (incorporating the desire for thinness and satisfaction with appearance) in young girls, as well as the relationship between body satisfaction and self-esteem. Research suggests that exposure to mass media

depicting the thin-ideal body is linked to body image disturbances in women. A meta analysis study that examined experimental and correlational studies testing the links between media exposure to women's body dissatisfaction, internalization of the thin ideal, and eating behaviors and beliefs with a sample of 77 studies that yielded 141 effect sizes found outcomes that support the notion that exposure to media images depicting the thin-ideal body is related to body image concerns for women (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008). Another meta-analytic study showed the effect of experimental manipulations of the thin beauty ideal, as portrayed in the mass media, on female body image. Data from 25 studies were used to examine the main effect of mass media images of the slender ideal, as well as the moderating effects of pre-existing body-image problems, the age of the participants, the number of stimulus presentations, and the type of research design. Results showed body image was significantly more negative after viewing thin media images than after viewing images of average size models, plus size models, or inanimate objects. The effect was stronger for participants less than 19 years of age, and for participants who are vulnerable to activation of a thinness schema (Groesz, Levine, & Mumen, 2002). Results supported the sociocultural perspective that mass media promulgates a slender ideal that elicits body dissatisfaction implications (Groesz et al., 2002). Also, studies found that adolescent's lives are more influenced by the media now than ever before (Kraus, 2007).

### **My own Story**

I also incorporated an auto-ethnographic narrative approach to my research. When I began the research for this capstone project, I was working in the cosmetics/beauty industry and was continually under pressure not only to be my best, but also to be beautiful. I was on a constant mission to better myself and to search for flaws I could fix. Sometimes, the product packaging itself would convince me of a flaw I never would have noticed otherwise. Did I need a

moisturizer that was pore minimizing or line reducing? Maybe I needed both? I could find my answer on the advertisement installed in the display. The beautiful, fresh-faced, airbrushed model confirmed that I needed both...and more. My angst did not end over which moisturizer I needed to buy; I was faced with a bevy of products that would help me to achieve the perfect end result. The perfect end result was that of the model on the advertisements on every shelf and end cap, and on the magazine that was strategically placed at the checkout counter.

*What did this mean for me?* After studying visual culture in a University of Florida masters course I began to realize the messages I was constantly and consistently bombarded with were not only present at my work place or in these magazines, but they were on television, radio, social media, in the grocery store...they were everywhere! Being surrounded daily by images with messages that told me I needed products to fix my flaws left me feeling like I, alone, was not good enough. Everyday, without me even realizing it, was filled with efforts to make myself better. I was striving for perfection, and perfection was the model images that were plastered around my world. I would wake up first thing in the morning and fix my hair and make-up. Even if I wasn't going anywhere public, I could get more accomplished (and accomplished better) if I looked pretty doing it. I was always on a mission to lose weight, even at 5'2" and 110 lbs. I would eat healthy foods, go to the gym, buy all the right clothes; I kept a spotless apartment and clean car. My life needed to be as perfect as a scene from a television show or an image from one of the Pottery Barn catalogs that would show up in my mailbox. I was concerned, every minute of every day, what everybody else thought of me. More than anything else, I wanted to be the *perfect girl*.

### **Returning to the Literature for a Better Understanding of the Perfect Girl.**

A study done of the "Good Girl Scout" stereotype and the awareness of expectation of

perfection highlighted girls' cognizance of "goodness", their resistance to it, and the seemingly contradictory characteristics of perfection (James, Kirk, & James, 2012). (See also Girl Scouts of the USA, 2008, p. 29, cited in James et al., 2012). "These characteristics inform two key domains of leadership: Strong Sense of Self, which focuses on a girl's self-esteem and self-efficacy rather than on any particular identity. The second is Critical Thinking, which encourages girls 'to examine ideas from a variety of viewpoints... and explore implications of gender issues for their lives and their leadership development' "(James, Kirk, & James, 2012). (See also Girl Scouts of the USA, 2008, p. 29, cited in James et al., 2012). In this study, the quest for perfection proved to bear complex and intense pressures that, without emotional guidance to encourage them to deconstruct the societal challenges they face, could negatively impact the girls and the organization charged with empowering them (James et al., 2012).

The perfect girl image has changed throughout recent history. For much of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, girl perfection largely hinged on her appearance, virtue, and domesticity (James et al., 2012). (See also MacLeod, 2000; Rothman, 2000, cited in James et al., 2012). By contrast, "perfect girls" of today are expected to excel at sports, perform academically at the top of their class, be thin, pretty, sexual to the appropriate degree, popular, and above all else, to be nice (James et al., 2012). (See also Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Roth, 2003; Funk, 2009; Girls Incorporated, 2006; Simmons, 2009, cited in James et al., 2012). The 21<sup>st</sup> century good girl is to be endowed with "effortless perfection" (James et al., 2012). (See also Roth, 2003, p.8, cited in James et al., 2012). With these heightened expectations, these new "good girls" have found themselves at the crossroads of an identity formation that is both self-sustaining and self-destructive. (James et al., 2012, p 27).

To some extent, the advances of feminism have obscured the degree to which societal

desires for the nostalgic “good girl” still weighs heavily against actual advances toward female equality. Coming from both internal and external sources, a crushing number of forces demand perfection from modern American girls, and the compounding effect is that demands are often contradictory (James et al., 2012, p.28). As social opportunities have increased for the American girl, so has the influx of expectations bearing down upon them. An increasingly popular means of dealing with such problems is becoming the “perfect girl”, the girl who meets all expectations at once- a girl who is effortlessly “good”. Some girls may act out this identity while still engaging in subtle and well-thought-out instances of resistance. Modern girls, like their predecessors, are masters of girlhood performance (James et al., 2012).

### **Where do Girls Acquire these Messages to be Perfect?**

Research about the impact of media messages on young girls is absolutely horrifying: girls are now dieting as young as 7 years old, the number of eating disorders in young females is increasing, and younger girls are being sexualized through advertisements, television, film, and music. A study published in *Developmental Psychology* found that as early as school entry, girls appear to already live in a culture in which peers and the media transmit the thin ideal in a way that negatively influences the development of body image and self esteem (Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006). A critical aspect of a young person’s development is to grapple with the question of “Who am I?” (Trammel & Dillihunt, 2012). (See also Belgrave, 2009; Calvert, Jordan, & Cocking, 2002; Erickson, 1980, cited in Trammel & Dillihunt, 2012). An individual’s self-concept is defined as our personal beliefs about who we are and our interpretations of how others see us (Trammel & Dillihunt, 2012). (See also Belgrave, 2009; Cole & Cole, 1993; Rosenberg & Kaplan, 1982, cited in Trammel & Dillihunt, 2012). This is particularly salient for girls, who rely more heavily than boys on the perceptions of others (Trammel & Dillihunt, 2012). (See also

Belgrave, 2009, cited in Trammel & Dillihunt, 2012).

After observing the adolescent and teen girls in the youth group I work with, it became apparent to me that because they have so much more access to these media messages now via internet and mobile internet access devices (phones, iPads, etc.), it is easier for them to be effected at a younger age and with more intensity. My own personal experiences as a young woman in a media drenched environment has brought me to the conclusion that the more a person is exposed to these messages from the media, the more these messages are able to infiltrate our thought process.

The messages are all around us. Even walking through the mall I see stores popular amongst young girls that boast short shorts and padded bikini tops to 8 year olds. I think about how girls are viewed in this world and in return, how they view themselves. It is obvious that sex sells. I receive Victoria's Secret catalogs in the mail, it seems like, twice a week. Their new tween brand is called, "Bright Young Things", and includes lace black cheeksters with the word "Wild" emblazoned on them. (See Figure 4.) I feel that consumers should take a stand against prominent brands preying on our children's deepest insecurities. Girls must be protected as they are learning to be comfortable in their own skin -- protected by their parents, brands, idols and media. I believe that adults have a responsibility to keep children safe, and help them learn to respect and love themselves and others. Treating young girls' bodies as a commodity hurts everyone, not just young girls, and not just the young girls who buy or covet these clothes.



**Figure 4:** Items from Victoria's Secret teen line "Bright Young Things"

The US is replete with an unprecedented number of young girls suffering from eating disorders, while pushing the boundaries of their sexuality. Children are being objectified by retailers who see them as nothing more than a path to increased profits. Young girls are encouraged to be more assertive with their sexuality, which can lead to very negative outcomes. Society is supporting this so-called “empowered” female attitude and movies, television shows, commercials, magazines, and books all glamorize sex and the right of young women to go after whatever it is they think will make them happy. Young girls need to understand their worth is not based on their appearance. Her appearance has little to do with true beauty and her worth isn’t wrapped up in looking good or being perfect.

### **A Light at the End of the Tunnel**

The more I researched the detrimental effects that media messages were creating in young adolescent girls, the more disheartened I became. I thought to myself that things were only going to get worse. Nobody was going to regulate the messages the media and advertisement agencies were perpetuating. As I continued my research, I was encouraged to find my own images, take my own pictures and videos of what messages were affecting me. This task turned out to be actually much more difficult than I anticipated. The images I found and collected over the course of my research contained words and/or images that send the message to females that to be desirable and important we must be a certain way. I recognized the patterns and themes present among the images I was discovering. Common patterns included messages that portrayed that as women we are most valued if we conform to the standards set forth by these images, that is, if we are young, slim, and sexy, and if we maintain the qualities of the mass media depictions of the perfect girl. The following paragraphs explain these patterns more carefully, but only scratch the surface of the meanings females receive from these kinds of

images.

*What it Means to be Female.* From a young age, girls are shown by the media what it means to be female. I included in my collection pictures of Barbie, who is the most notorious example of setting unattainable standards of beauty to girls from a young age. I found it to be interesting that even though girls' dolls are less exaggerated ideals of the female form, the dolls are still dressed in sexy outfits. Short skirts, crop tops, made up faces, and styled hair. (See Figure 5.) I even found and included images of dolls that came with corresponding outfits for the child (crop tops and short skirts). Companies are creating cosmetics targeted to girls as young as toddlers and Spas are hosting manicure and pedicure parties for girls as young as 4 years old. Young girls are being trained from a young age that a fashion and beauty regiment is an important part of what it means to be female.



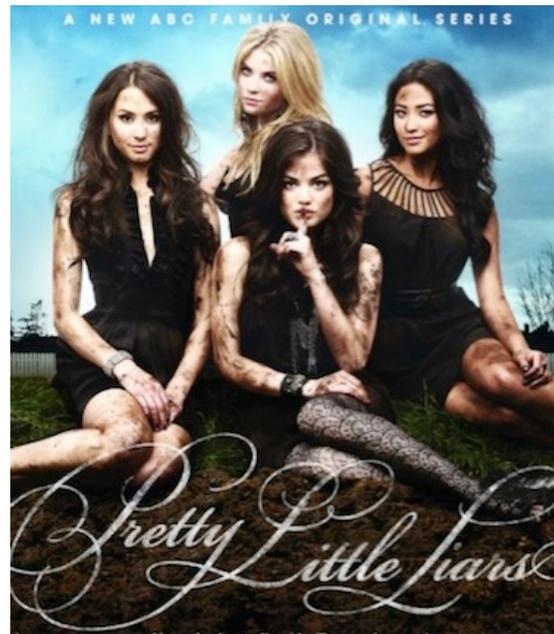
**Figure 5:** Dolls from the *Bratz* collection. This line of dolls is very popular among elementary school age girls.

*We Must Stay Young, Slim, and Sexy.* I included a number of images in my collection that

send the message that in order to be important, desirable, or necessary, we must stay young, slim, and sexy. The models used in advertisements and the actresses on television and film media set the societal standard of what women should strive to become. The media consistently portrays women in positions of power who possess these qualities which sends the message that in order to achieve these power positions these are the external qualities we must present. Young airbrushed models are pictured in advertisements for wrinkle cream and anti-aging products. Celebrities with flawless, airbrushed skin are used to advertise makeup and skin care. Companies, stores, and advertisements, bombard us with a tremendous variety of products that promise to help us achieve these ideals, which reinforces the messages that we are receiving from the media already.

*The Perfect Girl.* Another one of the common patterns I discovered amongst the images I compiled was the portrayed qualities of the perfect American girl. One of the best examples of this theme can be found in images from the ABC Family original series *Pretty Little Liars*. (See Figure 6.) *Pretty Little Liars* is a hit TV show that is popular amongst ‘tween’ and teenage girls. The main characters in the show are a group of four friends who portray all of the qualities of the ‘perfect girl’ to different degrees. There is the scholarly friend who is top of her class, always getting the best grades and awards and scholarships for her academic accomplishments. There is the athletic friend who despite taking time away from her work out regime and conditioning, still comes back to be deemed captain of the swim team. Another friend is the artistic one who is a wonderful writer and develops a relationship with the handsome, young English teacher. The last friend is the fashionable troublemaker, who is always pushing the limits of what the ‘perfect girl’ can get away with and still be perfect. All four girls are beautiful and always look perfect, no matter what chaotic or dangerous situation they may be in. Perfectly styled hair, perfectly

manicured nails, perfectly made up, even if they just rolled out of bed or survived an attempted murder from the unknown assailant who spends each episode tormenting the group. The qualities expressed by these girls are the perfect example of unattainable standards set forth by media, even on a show that is presented as ‘family friendly’.



**Figure 6:** ABC Family hit T.V. show *Pretty Little Liars*

### **So What's Next?**

About 8 months ago, I left the cosmetic/beauty industry. My time is now spent taking care of a little baby boy. We play games, read books, sing songs, and sometimes we turn on the television, but not usually. Leaving my job as a cosmetic / skincare specialist changed my lifestyle completely. Over the past 8 months I have slowly, but steadily, become less concerned with striving for perfection. What I have realized is that removing myself from media drenched environments has significantly changed not only my lifestyle, but also my perspective about myself. Although I still struggle with the trappings of a consumer capitalist girlhood such as makeup, weight issues, and clothes, during this process I discovered a silver lining. The silver

lining I have discovered in my research process, is that the very harmful effects of media messages can not only be moderated, but, over time, may also be reversed.

As a society, we should desire to situate girls as active agents and producers of culture and meaning. Educators should be encouraged to develop and refine programs to help girls counter and resist the negative societal messages they may receive and to build positive self-concepts (James et al., 2012). Educators should also take note of teenagers' positive usage of social networking and use it in classrooms to help facilitate learning (James et al., 2012).

Although more research is needed, evaluation studies have shown that children who are taught media literacy concepts (such as being more critical media consumers, understanding that media messages are constructed and can be deconstructed to uncover their assumptions and hidden values, and that messages are produced within economic, social, and political context) are less susceptible to the negative effects of subsequent media use (Thomas, 1998; Austin & Johnson, 1997). The task of connecting art education to these aims will not be easy. As stated by Delacruz, "Teachers' technology-related attitudes, capabilities, and working conditions are central to that work, but more than that, teachers conceptualizations about the relationships between art education, technology, young people, and world conditions, are now of the utmost importance" (Delacruz, 2009). Teachers must start by realizing that as a society we are inundated with media messages daily. Teachers must then ask how well are we preparing our students to understand and react to these messages. It is important to consider how we help our students know that what they see and hear in the media may not be reality. This can be as simple as asking students what they see and what their point of view is. Media Literacy programs may involve having conversations as a group or allowing students to reflect individually using sketchbook journals. Students can be encouraged to take pictures of media messages they find,

blog about the effects media messages have on their world directly, and start conversations about media messages using social media and online network sites.

Facebook and Internet blogging are now transforming the traditional pathways in which adolescent identities are constructed. These online spaces in which adolescents create and co-construct their identities through introspection, relationship building, and experimentation, are inextricably linked to their physical and virtual worlds (Trammel & Dillihunt, 2012). (See also Bortree, 2005; Huffaker & Calvert, 2006; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008, cited in Trammel & Dillihunt, 2012). Identity construction on social media sites, or SNS, may allow girls to construct an identity without societal judgments and limitations of their abilities (Trammel & Dillihunt, 2012). Creative and critical utilization of online social media may be a useful addition to any media literacy oriented educational program. Regardless of approaches one develops in the classroom, it is absolutely crucial to educate ourselves and young children of these effects and that they are real. I know now going forward that I will take care in how much I expose myself to messages perpetuated in the media, and I will continue to encourage others to do the same.

## **Final Reflections**

### **Looking Back**

Reflecting back on this entire process I feel hopeful for the future. Although media messages are becoming more intense and more prevalent with technology allowing for more media avenues, I have come to realize that girls are not necessarily destined to be consumed by media influence. My concern for young females remains, as my research has confirmed that adolescents are at higher risk to be influenced by their surroundings and may not yet have the capacity to recognize when or how they are being influenced by media messages. However, as females, and as a society in general, we do have the ability to recognize media

messages and learn how to process them and personalize them to fit our own needs and wants. It is also possible for us to educate adolescents in media literacy to prevent them from being too unwillingly consumed by media messages and their proposed ideals of perfection. After being consumed by the beauty industry for almost a decade, I was able to reflect with wisdom and hindsight exactly how media messages had shaped and molded my world to fit their endorsed standards of beauty. I was also able to realize that once you recognize that media messages are influencing your thought process and way of life, it is possible to remove yourself from situations that will manifest these ideals that girls have to be ‘perfect’. We do have agency over what we choose to influence our lives, and media literacy is the best way to ensure this agency.

Studies show that when girls do have media literacy education they are more equipped to think analytically about the media messages and ask critical questions. Media literacy programs such as Girls Inc. Media Literacy®, encourages girls to examine how media messages are constructed, how these messages reflect social values, and how girls’ active participation can influence the messages – and the values. There are many media literacy programs available to assist in building media literacy curriculums and a more media-aware society. Resources such as ‘Media Awareness Network’, ‘Center for Media Literacy’, ‘Media Literacy Project’, and the ‘National Association for Media Literacy Education’ are full of information and can be helpful in incorporating media literacy in the classroom. Links to these sites and more are available on my website. These resources reflect that there are positive changes when media literacy is introduced.

### **Additional Resources**

The ultimate goal of this study was to create awareness of media messages perpetuated by numerous media outlets and how those messages may affect young adolescent females. All of

my information and research can be accessed via the website that corresponds with this capstone paper. I have also opted to use social media networks in a more positive way by bringing awareness to this topic and sharing the information online.

I have created a Scoop.it archive to maintain the scholarly articles, research, references, and related videos I have compiled over the course of my investigation into the effects of media messages on adolescent females. (See Figure 7.) My Scoop.it collection is available at <http://www.scoop.it/t/ashley-s-art-education-scoops#curate>.

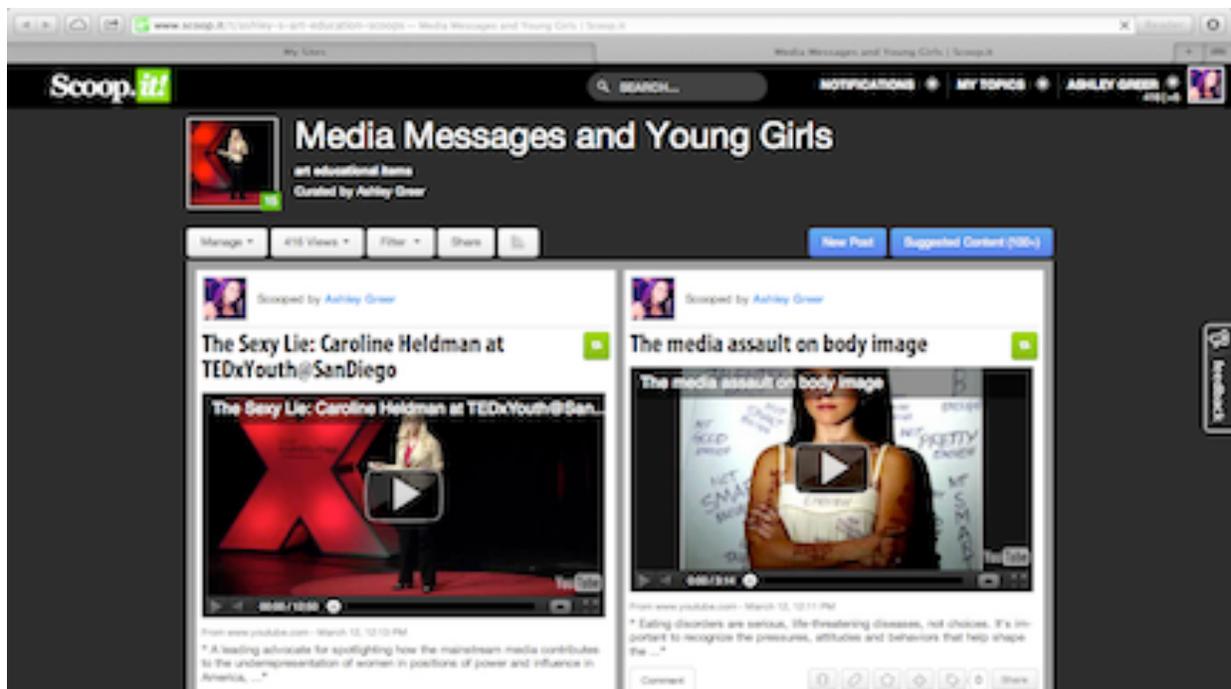
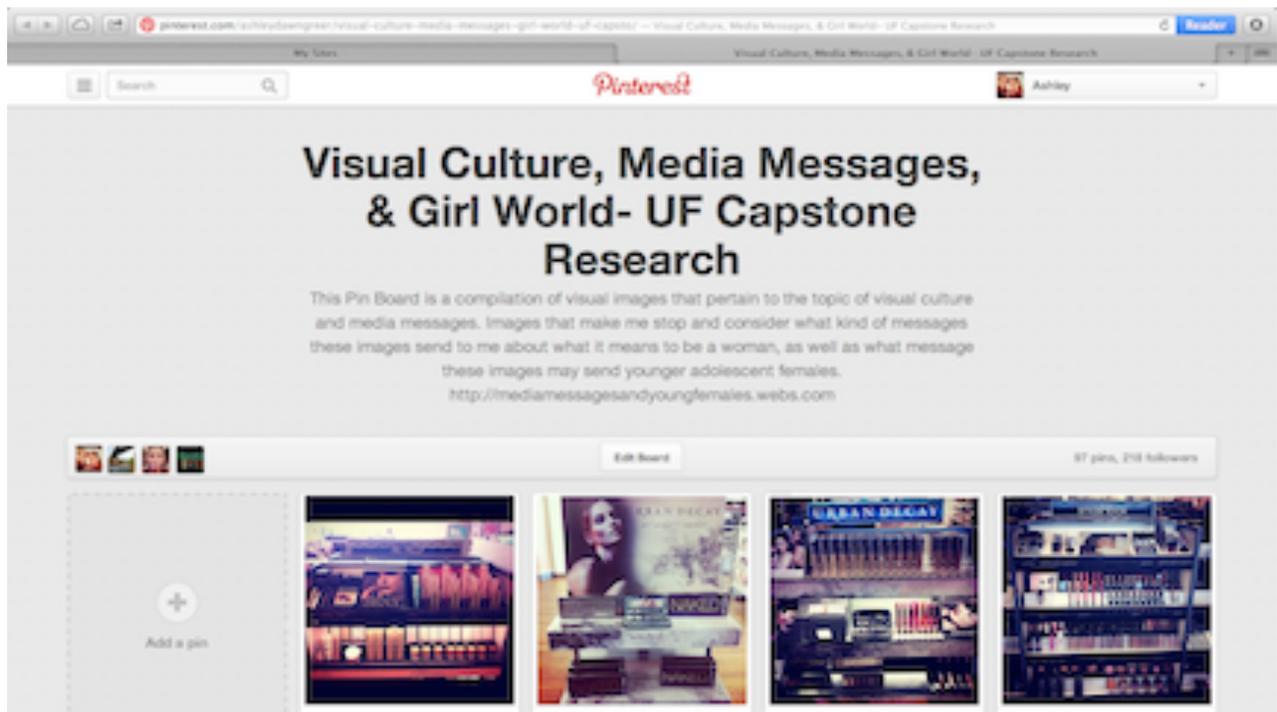


Figure 7: Screen shot of my Scoop.it archive

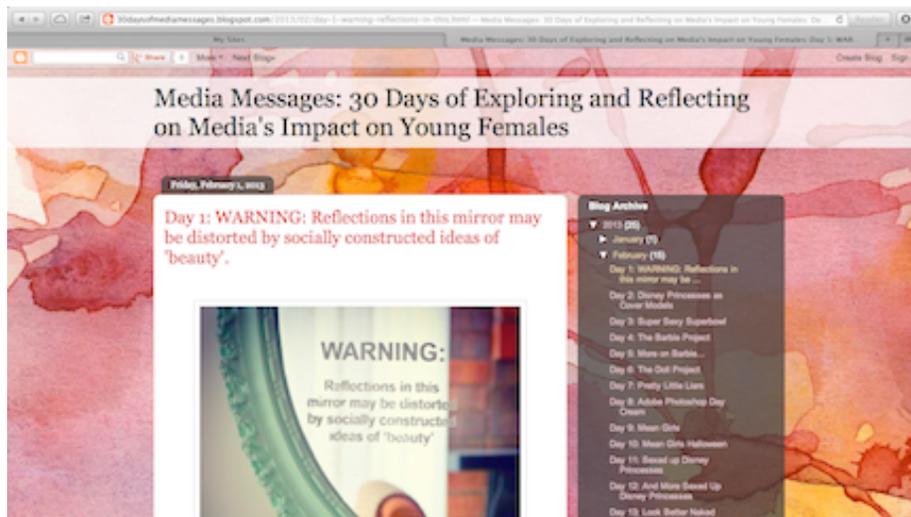
Another venue for the dissemination of my research and topic awareness is a Pinterest board I created for this topic titled “Visual Culture, Media Messages, & Girl World”. (See Figure 8.) My Pinterest board consists of annotated images that I feel either send a message to young girls or that bring awareness to visual awareness to visual culture and the importance of media literacy. My Pinterest Board may be seen at <http://pinterest.com/ashleydawngreer/visual-culture-media-messages-girl-world-uf-capsto/>.



**Figure 8:** Screen shot of my Pinterest board

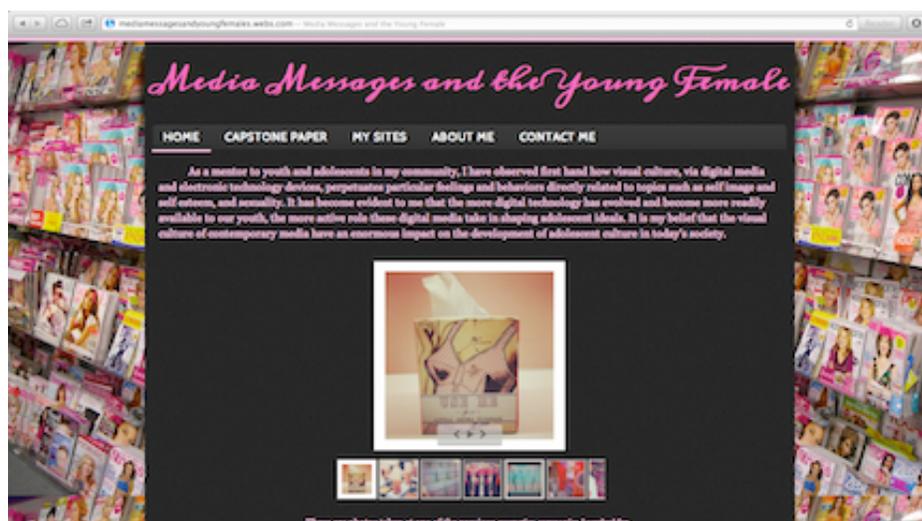
My blog “Media Messages: 30 Days of Exploring and Reflecting on Media’s Impact on Young Females” was my attempt to log and document media messages I came across in my daily uses of social media (Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr) and in everyday activities. I wanted to consider how an adolescent would react to such imagery and speculate as to what kind of message it would send. I know many of the adolescent girls I am around spend much of their

time on these social network sites and I know they see far more than I could even imagine. The blog “Media Messages: 30 Days of Exploring and Reflecting on Media’s Impact on Young Females” is available at <http://30daysofmediamessages.blogspot.com>.



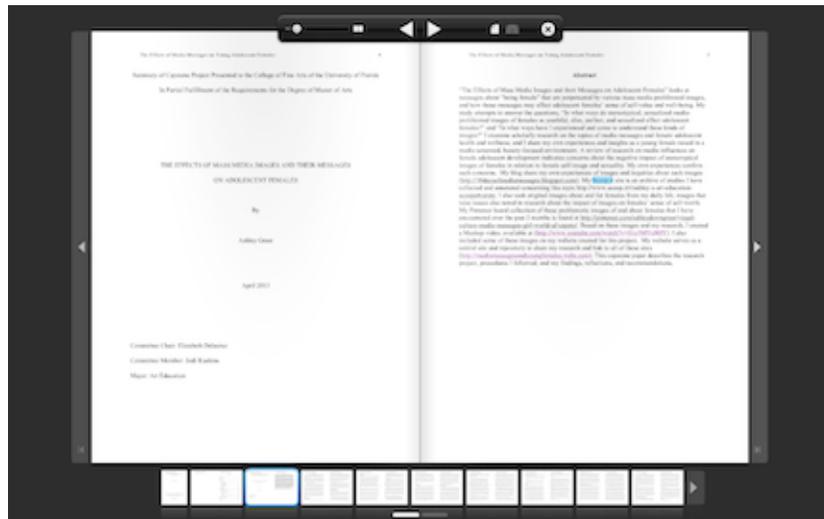
**Figure 9:** Screen shot of my Blog

My study findings and outcomes on my blog, my Scoop It Folder, my Pinterest board, and in this capstone paper, are all contained on my website. My website is searchable using tags such as #teen, #girls, #female, #adolescent, #media, #messages, #visual, #culture, #media messages, #visual culture, #self-image, #body image, #make-up, #fashion, #magazines, #advertisements, #models, #dolls, #sexualization, and #beauty. My website can be accessed at <http://mediamessagesandyoungfemales.webs.com>.



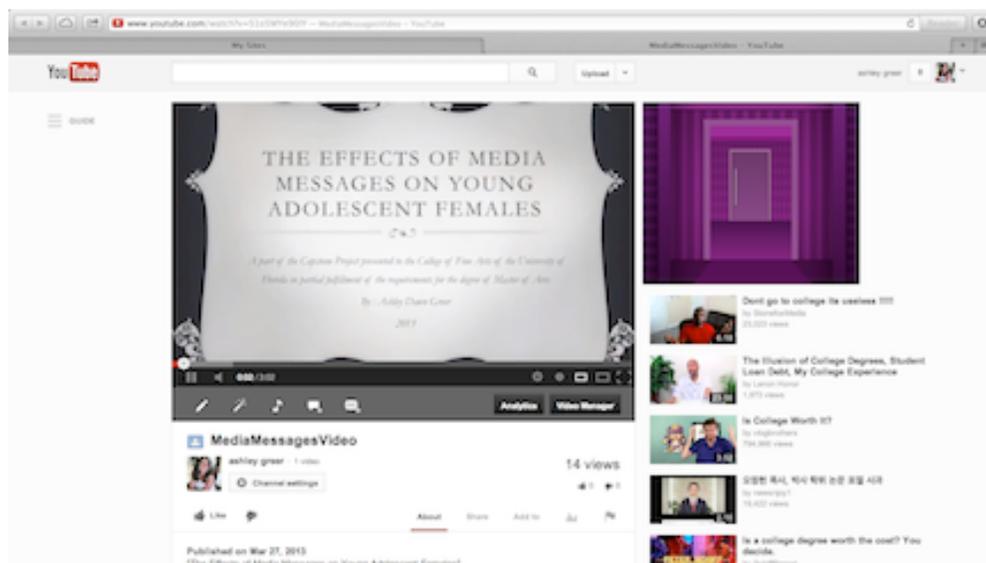
**Figure 10:** Screen shot of my website

My capstone paper is published in ISSUU as a means of further distributing my research and making it even more accessible to the public. (See Figure 11.) My ISSUU publication of this capstone paper may be found on my website as well as at (<http://issuu.com/ashleygreer/docs/theeffectsofmediamessagesonyoungfemales>).



**Figure 11:** Screen shot of my capstone paper published in ISSUU

I created a video ‘mashup’ as a means of further spreading the word and my concerns about media messages and young adolescent females. (See Figure 12.) My video ‘mashup’ incorporates some of the images and media I feel best illustrates my data. The video is published on my website and at the YouTube address (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S1o5MYe90IY>).



**Figure 12:** Screen shot of my YouTube video

I have also shared my research on the University of Florida student moderated Facebook page and closed social network, UFARTED. I have tweeted my research findings and sites to Twitter and shared my findings with my peers. Altogether, my sharing via Facebook and Twitter, my blog, Pinterest Board, Scoop It, ISSUU publication, YouTube video, and website provide a rich social media opportunity to share my research and experiences.

By examining studies on the extent to which peer/media/cultural influence effects young adolescent females, I hope to establish the importance of understanding ways to engage youth in understanding and navigating these effects through media literacy programs. I plan to continue my research and advocacy of visual culture and media literacy and have already spoken with colleagues who have expressed interest in a collaborative effort.

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**Biography: Ashley Greer**

I am a recent graduate of North Georgia College and State University (NGCSU) in Dahlonega, Georgia, where I majored in Art Education. As an Art Education major at NGCSU, I was Co-President and founding member of the NGCSU chapter of GAEA, and was involved in numerous service-learning projects, including one for the Smithsonian Traveling Exhibit "Key Ingredients".

I am currently a student in the Masters of Arts Education Program at the University of Florida. While I have learned about so many important aspects of art education, there has been one aspect of art education learning that was very significant and influential to my way of thinking about art education. Visual culture and media messages are a very important topic to me as a young female and also as a mentor to young girls.

In several of the classes I have experienced I have been asked to consider how media messages and the visual culture that surrounds us daily may affect our thought processes and our art. My research was overwhelming and it disturbed me to realize how much visual culture is destroying our society- especially our youth. I also realized how much these contemporary issues have affected me personally. The more I have considered visual culture and how much I have been influenced by society and media culture, I have realized that I do not have to be perfect. Understanding this has allowed me to venture out in my art and not worry so much about a controlled process or result. Non-objective art has become such a freeing outlet for me as an artist. My biggest strategy as an artist right now is to continue learning and evolving as a person. I believe that when an artist evolves in their life, they evolve in their work.

