WHAT MUSIC VIDEOS TEACH AT-RISK ADOLESCENT GIRLS: MAKING A CASE FOR MEDIA LITERACY CURRICULUM

By

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by

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It would be remiss not to include my Angell ancestors who were educators and university presidents throughout the Northeast United States. My great-grandfather Angell opened the University of Michigan doors to women, one of the first university presidents to do so. He changed the system. I’m proud to follow those renegade footsteps.
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The purpose of this study was to explore the meanings that at-risk adolescent girls develop through viewing and listening to the verbal and nonverbal social signs and symbols in music videos. Relatively little research has been conducted about music videos despite two decades of concerns. Prior research that is available suggests that music videos have a primarily negative effect on young people. Concerns include the psychological impact on youth, where normative expectations may be developed about conflict resolution, race, and male-female relationships.

The qualitative methods used in this dissertation were in-depth individual interviews, focus groups, participant observation, and collection of room photographs and media diaries. Interviews with 36 at-risk adolescent girls ages 11 to 18, and their media artifacts, provided insight into how this population uses music videos for information, entertainment, and education.
Findings indicate that participants learn behaviors that are cultivated by the multisensory and affective impact of music videos. Participants supported the findings of prior research that observational and incidental social learning is taking place through using music videos. This study identified five themes through constant comparison of the data, which suggest that this population uses music videos as social text to form identity and understand youth culture signs and symbols. Uses and gratifications identified in this study include identity formation, mood enhancement, modeling prosocial behaviors, and language development. Significant symbols presented in music videos, such as slang and dance moves, are important symbolic short-cuts that help viewers interpret meanings.

For this population, popular music videos are physiologically arousing and have psychosocial benefits. Participants indicated that some music videos are prosocial, providing information about healthy psychosocial behaviors, such as independence, problem-solving and spirituality. There is also evidence of the third-person effect, as participants believed that boys and young children are more susceptible to negative messages.

This study substantiates the need for media literacy curriculum that is designed to reach at-risk adolescent audiences. The unexpected prosocial element indicates a necessity to investigate the effects from programming not intended for young audiences.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Mass media have become an integral part of today’s social environment. Introductory mass media textbooks explain that these communication tools are basically designed to inform, educate, entertain, and persuade audiences (Campbell, 2000). Recognized as today’s storytellers (Kellner, 1998b), media appear to play a powerful role in the social construction of knowledge about the world. As Cortés (2001) noted,

> More than simply providing information, media also influence viewer and reader structures for perceiving, receiving, thinking and remembering—the way people process and organize information and ideas as they construct their personal cultural knowledge. (p. 172)

Many studies show the relationship between media consumption and its influence on shaping attitudes, opinions, and behaviors. The purpose of this exploratory study was to ascertain whether at-risk adolescent girls develop meanings about themselves and social norms through watching music videos, thereby influencing their cognitive, emotional, attitudinal, and behavioral development. A triangulated qualitative methodology was developed to address the following question: “What are the meanings at-risk adolescent girls construct when viewing and listening to the verbal and nonverbal social signs and symbols in music videos?” Forty interviews were conducted and media artifacts were collected over a period of 3 months with at-risk adolescent girls at five organizations located throughout Northeast Florida. According to Huntemann and Morgan (2001), “All together, the massive flow of popular images, representations, and
symbolic modes disseminated by the media profoundly shapes what young people think about the world and how they perceive themselves in relation to it” (p. 309).

**Background**

A general concern is that American children are being raised in today’s mediated world with little attention given to the psychological and physiological impact of their “media diet.” A typical U.S. child aged 8 to 13 uses the Internet, television, radio, video games, commercial videotapes, movies, magazines and music an average of 6 hours every day, sometimes using two or more media at once (Roberts, Foehr, Rideout, & Brodie, 1999; Semali, 2003; Steyer, 2002).

In relation to this media diet, the educational, criminal justice, and health care communities believe that media’s social construction of reality promotes risk-taking behaviors among youth (Behson, 2002; Hallett, 2003; Steyer, 2002; Strasburger & Wilson, 2002; Villani, 2001). In addition, research shows that although risk taking youth may be adept at multi-media literacies, their poor performance in traditional, print-text classrooms keep them in a downward spiral. In other words, the poorer their classroom performance, the less access they are given to technology (O’Brien, 2001; Semali, 2002).

Pedagogical concerns include the lack of quiet time, impact on a child’s ability to make independent decisions, and development of the “2-minute” mind. In addition, pediatricians are beginning to notice differences in brain development and attitudes based on media content and use (American Academy of Pediatrics [AAP], 1999; Buckingham, 2003; Healy, 1998).

On a more positive note, researchers also have found that children are “active” consumers of media, not passive recipients of massive amounts of data (Buckingham, 2003). They are well-versed in using diverse symbol systems that promote their
understanding of concepts on a multitude of levels (Semali, 2002). This “mediasphere” provides educators, social service workers, health care providers, and others an unprecedented opportunity to develop programs that provide multi-mediated learning strategies for all types of children (Semali, 2002).

Media literacy skills may assist at-risk adolescent girls in negotiating their culture, helping them understand how media impacts their cultural landscape and sense of self. The PACE Center for Girls, an intervention-based education program in Florida, notes in their 2002 Annual Report,

They are living in a society that continues to victimize all girls by promoting a pop culture that encourages them to grow up too quickly, a fashion and film industry that is filled with sexual, violent or unhealthy female role models. (p. 5)

**Media Literacy**

The concept of media literacy, or developing a critical perspective regarding media, has evolved in response to the substantial increase in information sources. Media literacy is basically defined as “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and produce communication in a variety of forms” (Aufderheide, 2001, p. 79).

Primary reasons for media literacy training are to gain skills in information management, to understand the possible effects of media use, and to increase the potential for democratic discourse. First, since people now consume enormous amounts of information on a daily basis, they need analytic tools to deal with this “diet” of data. As noted by Hammer (1995), “media produces and reproduces social relations. An understanding of . . . media literacy assists students to decode their own environment” (p. 34). With the advent of new technologies, vertical integration of international media systems, convergence, cross-cultural communication, and the increase in media outlets,
strong arguments support the development of information-management skill (Campbell, 2000; Cortés, 2000; Kellner, 1998b; Potter, 1998; Silverblatt, 1995).

Second, becoming knowledgeable about the possible uses, abuses, benefits, and problems of media may help consumers identify the potential impact of media messages. According to Potter (1998),

People operating at high levels of media literacy are mindful during exposure. They are skeptical of the interpretations they see and actively process those messages. This process frequently ends with them constructing their own meanings. (p. 7)

Theoretically, media-literate people are less susceptible to media information because they realize the messages are authored and designed to impact them on some level. By becoming more aware of how media construct information, children may become more self-determined in their mediated world. In addition, teachers who gain media-literacy skills may become more effective disseminators of information, bridge the gap between the societal and classroom curriculums, and become empowered critical consumers (Harris, 1994; Kellner, 1998b). As von Feilitzen (1999) noted,

The real challenge today is not to teach—it is to stimulate learning. For in today’s world, to educate is to be able to reach out to young people, and help them explore their way through the media, through the Internet, today’s tools of education. With some exceptions, most children have little formal introduction to the media world in which they are born and raised. (p. 13)

Research shows there are currently two social service organizations developing media literacy programs for at-risk adolescent populations: the New York State Office of Children and Families in Albany, New York, and the Eastern District Attorney’s Office in Salem, Massachusetts. Both groups have found that media-literacy training provides extensive benefits to the at-risk adolescent populations they are serving. After participating in Salem’s Flashpoint Program, participants “demonstrated an
understanding that media is used not only to sell products but also to transmit and influence social values. Participants also reported improved awareness of the distortions of media, such as the minimization of consequences for violent behavior” (Moore, Dechillo, Nicholson, Genovese, & Sladen, 2000, p. 29).

While the current study did not specifically address the development and implementation of media literacy skills, the goal was to provide data about the potential role(s) music videos play in the formation of cultural meanings and personal identity of at-risk adolescent girls. This information then could be used to develop gender-specific media literacy intervention curriculum. When discussing the existing research about music videos, Whitely (1997) pointed to how “there is still a marked absence of theoretical models which move beyond the limitations of content analysis, and which allow for a critical examination of the textual links between sound and vision in establishing meaning” (p. 259).

**Defining an At-Risk Population**

Defining at-risk is somewhat difficult, as there is often a perception that this term refers only to the behavior of the adolescent. Burt, Resnick, and Novick (1998), of the American Psychological Association, pointed to how risk taking is perceived as normative and adaptive in some instances and considered to be maladjusted in other situations. They also noted how the social environment is a key factor in the healthy psychosocial development of children and adolescents. Dryfoos (1992) indicated “most of the factors that place children at risk are not of their own doing. They subsist in high-risk families . . . and have high probabilities of suffering the consequences of ‘new morbidities’ resulting from early sex, drugs, stress, and violence” (p. 128).
My study focused on the female adolescent who is identified as already in a high-risk situation. According to the National Council on Crime and Delinquency (2000), girls are the fastest growing segment of the juvenile justice population. The types of offenses that these young women commit are primarily “status” offenses, such as truancy, running away from home, breaking curfew, vandalism, and sexual misconduct (Calhoun, Jurgens, & Chen, 1993; Community Research Associates [CRA], 1998; Jessor, 1992; Weiler, 1999). School failure and victimization in combination with family, health, and economic problems are recognized as almost universal factors underlying young women getting in legal trouble—and these problems reach an early crisis when girls are between 11 and 13 years of age (Richie, Tsenin, & Widom, 2000). Available statistics that document this troubling trend include the following:

- Between 1992 and 1996, the number of national arrests of female juveniles for violent crimes increased by 25% compared with no increase in the arrests of male juveniles (Scahill, 2000).
- Between 1988 and 1997, the number of national cases involving females increased for all racial groups (white: 74%, black: 106%, and all other races: 102%) (Scahill, 2000).
- In Florida delinquency referrals of girls rose 67% over the past decade; while delinquency referrals of boys rose 25% (Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, 2004).

However, Weiler (1999) noted that one reason for this change in statistics may be the changes in the way girls are charged. For example, a girl who, in self-defense, shoves her parents out of the way as she tries to run away is now likely to be arrested for assault, a criminal offense; previously, she would have been arrested for the lesser status offense of running away.

**Risk Factors**

The National Council on Crime and Delinquency (1997) and The PACE Center for Girls (2002), an intervention-based educational program based in Florida, identify
risk factors in four areas of a girl’s life: school, family, peer relationships, and community. The Centre for Research on Youth at Risk (2003) and Lauritsen (2003) broke risk factors down into three broad areas: risk factors present in the family, risk factors present in the young person, and risk factors in the environment or wider community. Girls can be at-risk to drop out of school, experience teen-age pregnancy, become involved in juvenile justice, experience home abuse, and/or use drugs or alcohol. Girls who experience or are exposed to multiple risk factors are at higher risk for entering or getting further involved in the juvenile justice system (PACE, 2002).

Education appears to be a key component in keeping girls from getting into trouble with the legal system. As stated by the National Council on Crime and Delinquency (2000), “the most statistically significant risk factor underlying girls’ offending is educational failure, especially during their middle school years” (p. 1).

My study assessed how at-risk adolescent girls were creating meanings about their world, using the philosophical orientation that meanings can be created through interaction with the mediated symbols of today’s society. By determining which cultural verbal and nonverbal symbols were present and significant to this population in music videos, My study ascertained if and how music videos were playing a role in their formation of social identity.

**Philosophical Perspective**

The theories of semiotics and symbolic interactionism provided the guiding philosophical perspective for My study. This critical-cultural theoretical perspective also incorporated knowledge from existing theories about media’s role(s) in society. One aspect of becoming media literate is to understand how cultural meanings are
symbolically encoded in media systems, often promoting the status quo (Silverblatt, 1995).

Accordingly, the mass communication theories of uses and gratifications, social learning and cognition, and cultivation were important in the analysis of the information. Media’s intertextual role in constructing cultural meanings for audiences, where media is often a source of incidental and observational learning, was an important aspect of both Bandura’s social learning theory and Gerbner’s cultivation approach (Campbell, 2000; Cortés, 2000; Kellner, 1998b).

Symbolic interactionism is recognized as one of the first social science theories to discuss how we use culture to learn from each other. In 1934, George H. Mead proposed that we learn our social roles through interaction with each other to create and sustain a productive social unit. In addition, he noted that the use of symbols transformed the socialization process because symbols structure our ability to perceive and interpret what goes on around us.

The symbolic interaction perspective sees humans as active and dynamic in their environments. Some of the characteristics of the symbolic interaction perspective are an emphasis on interactions among people, use of symbols in communication and interaction, interpretation as part of action, and self as constructed by individuals and others in flexible, adjustable social processes (Blumer, 1969; Charon, 2001; Gingrich, 2003).

In symbolic interactionism, meanings are recognized as social products, but there is also a process of interpretation (or self-interaction) that has profound implications on how the meanings develop. In other words, the sender’s message will be interpreted by
the receiver with input from both external and internal social elements (Blumer, 1969; Hewitt, 2003).

Charon (2001) further explained this process, noting that interaction is an ongoing activity and thinking is an integral part of both internal and external interaction; and how we define a situation in the present dictates our reactions. In other words, as active participants, people are constantly evolving and redefining environments.

Blumer (1969) pointed to how symbolic interactionism is an excellent choice for studying media systems because of the changing character of media presentations; the active character of audiences; the process of interpretation that intervenes between presentations and audiences; and the incorporation of media, presentations, and people in an ever-evolving world. He stated that a research approach
calls for handling the media-influence not in isolation but in relation to other sources of communication which challenge, oppose, merge with, or reinforce its play . . . catching the way in which people are defining to one another the content of the given media-influence under study. (p. 194)

The most important concept in symbolic interactionism is the symbol, or in Mead’s (1934) term, the significant symbol. Using symbols is perhaps the most important development in human evolution. Because humans can use significant symbols, they interact with each other on the basis of meanings. Their responses depend on the interpretation of symbols rather than just acting as a conditioned response. In other words, they engage in symbolic interaction (Charon, 2001; Hewitt, 2003).

Semiotic inquiry takes the “sign” concept of symbolic interaction even farther. Semioticians involved with mass media research note that media are the story-tellers of our time, and provide recognizable social symbols as shortcuts to reach audiences (Cobley & Jansz, 1999; Danesi, 1999; Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993;). As such, media can play a
pervasive role in constructing worldviews, especially of American youth who live in a relatively media-saturated environment (Semali, 2002).

Semiotics provide researchers with a conceptual framework and a set of methods and concepts that can be used across a full range of signifying practices, including gesture, posture, dress, writing, speech, photography, and the mass media (Chandler, 2002). As Danesi (1999) noted,

Semiotics ultimately allows us to filter the implicit meanings and images that swarm and flow through us every day, immunizing us against becoming passive victims of a situation. By understanding the images, the situation is changed, and we become active interpreters of signs. (p. 21)

Semiotics is an approach to communication that focuses on meaning and interpretation. The primary objective of media semiotics is to study how the mass media create or recycle signs for their own ends (Danesi, 2002; Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993). Roland Barthes initiated the study of media genres in the 1950s, using basic sign theory to analyze different media to expose the implicit meanings built into them (Jean, 1998). Media signs do not just convey meaning, but constitute a medium in which meanings are constructed. Danesi (2002) noted that

In identifying and documenting media structures, the semiotician is guided by three basic questions:
1. What does a certain structure (text, genre, etc.) mean?
2. How does it represent what it means?
3. Why does it mean what it means?

Semiotics has the potential to provide significant support in the study of communication systems. As Leeds-Hurwitz (1993) noted, “Communication researchers study communication, which presupposes a common signification system. Semiotics is the study of signification systems, therefore communication researchers may find it useful” (p. 12).
Scope and Timeline

My study included 40 participants from a variety of social service facilities serving this population in Jacksonville, Florida, and St. Augustine, Florida. The five organizations that participated were Children’s Home Society in Jacksonville, the Alpha Omega Miracle Home for pregnant teen-agers in St. Augustine, The St. Gerard House in St. Augustine, The Bridge of NE Florida in Jacksonville, and Girls, Inc., in Jacksonville, Florida. Several of these organizations are interested in developing cultural literacy and media education curriculum to aid their populations in negotiating today’s cultural environment.

The qualitative methodologies used for my study were interviews, media diaries, photos to ascertain “room cultures,” and observation during participant viewing of videos. During the interviews, the participants watched three music videos that ran in current rotation on MTV and BET. After viewing the videos, I asked each participant a series of questions (Appendix A) about her perceptions and reactions to the data.

Music videos were chosen because of their pervasive presence in today’s youth culture. Much of the social information teens consider important comes from music videos (Roberts, Christenson, Henriksen, & Bandy, 2002). Music video has altered the television viewing, music listening, and record-buying habits of the young people who constitute its audience (Strasburger & Wilson, 2002). Researchers note that, on average, American adolescents spend between 4 and 5 hours a day listening to music and watching music videos (Roberts et al., 2002).

The interviews were held over a period of 3 months to avoid interference with school and family schedules. Fry and Fry (1985) pointed to the value of interviews as a social science research method, claiming that,
Free-response techniques promise to both preserve the individual audience member’s process of forming connotations, and also to minimize the impact of the researcher’s own significations of a text. Allowing an audience member to talk about a media text in a relatively unstructured situation provides rich data, which can be analyzed using a variety of readily available techniques . . . by refocusing research attention to meaning; researchers can glean new insights into the transaction between media texts and audiences. (p. 460)

**Significance of Study**

My study provided information about the meanings at-risk adolescent girls may construct about themselves and social norms through their experience with music videos. The discussion of content and perceptions of the violence levels, gender roles, and sexual behaviors in music videos help to ascertain what at-risk adolescent females may be learning through their media diet (directly and indirectly) about modeling specific behaviors. As noted by Huntemann and Morgan (2001),

Theoretical work is needed to shed more light on how children integrate and negotiate symbolic media messages with the various and intertwined daily influences on their conception of who they are in relation to the world in which they live. (p. 319)

My study contributed information about how at-risk adolescent American females perceive music videos. Music videos have been recognized as a form of advertising: selling the music, the visual image of the artist, and a lifestyle (Burns, 1994; Jhally, 1994; Johansson, 1992). Videos are designed to develop product differentiation (Burns, 1994), provide role models for identification, and establish a new emotional dimension to viewing television through their nonlinear syntax (Johansson, 1992). Music is an important part of adolescent identity formation and can play an important role in how meanings are formed concerning gender roles, conflict resolution, and other culturally significant behaviors (Johansson, 1992). Steyer (2002) noted “Kids who are already feeling alienated and angry are especially responsive to lyrics that glorify hostility and
violence. For many in the music industry, feeling and fueling that adolescent rage is a fast way to profits in the large and lucrative teen market” (p. 85).

Jhally (1994) noted that music videos, in particular MTV, represent “the major marketing mechanism for popular music—changing the way in which we hear as well as the meaning we give to the products of the recording industry” (p.152). His concern about the demeaning female representations in music videos led Jhally to develop the videotape *Dreamworlds*, a deconstruction of how music videos are designed to emotionally impact audiences through form and content. Jhally’s point was to “obtain some cognitive and emotional distance from the world of images in which we are now immersed” (p. 151).

My study has implications for professionals wanting to help this youth population. As already noted, the educational, criminal justice and medical communities now recognize that media’s social construction of reality promotes unrealistic and risk-taking behavior in youth and adolescents (Behson, 2002; Hallett, 2003; Steyer, 2002; Strasburger & Wilson, 2002; Villani, 2001). Research shows that at-risk adolescents who become media literate gain extensive benefits, including increased self-esteem and awareness of how media impact their worldviews. According to Joe Behson (2002),

There is evidence that media literacy education can complement and enhance other youth education and treatment programs. As this group became more media savvy . . . they were able to challenge their perceptions of the world and of themselves. Prior to media literacy education, these youth considered their media consumption of violence, gang activity, and drug use as reaffirming an unalterable, harsh reality. Once empowered with critical thinking skills provided through media literacy, they began to challenge media messages rather than embrace them. (p. 40)

By discussing music videos—part of what Cortés (2001) referred to as the “societal curriculum”— participants may gain some understanding of how media shapes
and/or reflects their perceptions of social roles and norms. Identifying patterns of response, categories, and assumptions of participants helped me to develop a study that reflects the voices and views of participants. The data could be used to develop a gender-based media and cultural literacy intervention curriculum for at-risk adolescent girls.
Defining an At-Risk Population

Defining “at-risk” is somewhat difficult, as there is often a perception that this term refers only to the behavior of the adolescent (Lauritsen, 2003; “Report Says Environment Fails,” 1993). Burt et al. (1998) pointed to how risk taking is perceived as normative and adaptive in some instances and considered to be maladjusted in other situations. They also noted that the social environment is a key factor in the healthy psychosocial development of children and adolescents. Dryfoos (1992) indicated “most of the factors that place children at risk are not of their own doing. They subsist in high-risk families . . . and have high probabilities of suffering the consequences of ‘new morbidities’ resulting from early sex, drugs, stress, and violence” (p. 128).

Lauritsen (2003) and the American City and County article, “Report Says Environment Fails At-Risk Youth” (1993), also pointed to how there has been a failure to recognize the fundamental role of socially organized poverty, inequality, and discrimination in producing and maintaining a population of at-risk youth. Behson (2002) estimated that approximately one million American children identified as at-risk lived in out-of-home settings, including foster care, group homes, childcare facilities, and juvenile justice and mental health institutions. The social environment has failed to provide resources, support, and opportunities to prepare these children adequately for productive adulthood.
Additionally, being at-risk can have two levels of meaning. For adolescents already involved in risk behavior, being at-risk can mean being at-risk for health and life compromising outcomes, such as early pregnancy, trouble with the law, or illness related to their behaviors. The second level of meaning for at-risk involves adolescents not yet involved with risk behavior, but who are at-risk for initiating high-risk behaviors (Jessor, 1992). As Jessor (1992) stated, “the term ‘risk behavior’ refers, then, to any behaviors that can compromise the psychosocial aspects of successful adolescent development” (p. 22).

In discussing findings about risk behaviors, the New Jersey Task Force on Adolescent Violence (1999) indicated that psychologically unstable at-risk adolescents are the most likely population to emulate violence they witness in media. Their recommendations include establishing media literacy pilot programs in both elementary and middle schools to demystify violent images.

Profile of the At-Risk Adolescent Female

According to the National Council on Crime and Delinquency (2000), girls are the fastest growing segment of the juvenile justice population. School failure and victimization in combination with family, health, and economic problems are recognized as almost universal factors underlying young women getting in legal trouble—and these problems reach an early crisis when girls are between 11 and 13 years of age (Richie et al., 2000). Available statistics that document this troubling trend include the following:

- Between 1992 and 1996, the number of arrests of female juveniles for violent crimes increased by 25% compared with no increase in the arrests of male juveniles (Scahill, 2000).
- In Florida there has been a 67% increase in the number of girls referred for delinquency over the past decade; while delinquency referrals of boys rose 25% (Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, 2004).
• The property crime arrests of juvenile females increased 21% while arrests of males declined by 4% (CRA, 1998).

• Between 1988 and 1997, the number of cases involving females increased for all racial groups (white: 74%, black: 106% and all other races: 102%) (Scahill, 2000).

However, Weiler (1999) noted that one reason for this change in statistics may be the changes in the way girls are charged. For example, a girl who, in self-defense, shoves her parents out of the way as she tries to run away is now likely to be arrested for assault, a criminal offense; previously, she would have been arrested for the lesser status offense of running away. (p. 1)

Acoca (1999) pointed out that, during 1993 and 1997, the greatest increase in arrests for girls involved drug abuse and curfew violations—not violent crimes.

The juvenile female offender of the 1990s was likely to be under the age of 15, to have been sexually or physically abused, to be a woman of color, to come from a single-parent home, and to lack appropriate social and work-related skills (Acoca, 1999; Bartollas, 1993; Belknap, 1996). According to the National Council on Crime and Delinquency (2000), studies have uncovered a link between the victimization of women and their criminal behavior. Belknap (1996) pointed out that women offenders have disproportionately high records of victimization—usually incest, rape, and battering—before their incarceration.

The types of offenses that these young women commit are primarily “status” offenses, acts that would not be considered crimes if committed by adults. Status offenses include truancy, running away from home, breaking curfew, and sexual misconduct (such as promiscuity). In contrast, a “delinquent” offense is one that would be considered a crime if committed by an adult, such as murder, aggravated assault, robbery, and forcible rape (Bartollas, 1993; Calhoun, Jurgens, & Chen, 1993; CRA, 1998; Jessor, 1992; Weiler, 1999). According to Belknap (1996), in 1989 “22% of girls and 3% of boys held
in public juvenile facilities were there for nondelinquent reasons (status offenses, abuse and neglect, and voluntary commitment)” (p. 103).

Calhoun, Jurgens and Chen (1993) found that these adolescents committed offenses that were related to their immediate needs. For example, “adolescents of higher socioeconomic status (SES) were more likely to commit status offenses—to get attention or relieve boredom. In contrast, lower SES youths tend[ed] to become involved in serious delinquent offenses (such as burglary or drug-related murder), primarily for economic reasons” (p. 463). In Florida, juvenile crime (both status and violent offenses) peaks around 3:00 p.m., generally right after the school day is completed (Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, 2004).

The reflection of a strong gender bias within the juvenile justice system, where young women were being detained for status offenses at twice the rate of young men, prompted Congress to amend the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (JJDP) Act of 1974 (Acoca, 1999). To address this issue, Congress amended the Act in 1992 to require that state plans provide an analysis of and plan for gender-specific services. Research indicates that juvenile justice systems need to develop gender-specific prevention and intervention programs that address the unique needs of young women (Acoca, 1999; Campbell, 1995; PACE, 2002; Wells, 1994).

Risk Factors

The National Crime Prevention Council (2000) and The PACE Center for Girls (2002), an intervention-based educational program based in Florida, identified risk factors in four areas of a girl’s life: school, family, peer relationships, and community. St. Thomas University’s Canadian Centre for Research on Youth At Risk (2003) and Lauritsen (2003) broke this down into three broad areas: risk factors present in the
family, risk factors present in the young person, and risk factors in the environment or wider community. Girls can be at-risk to drop out of school, experience teen-age pregnancy, become involved in juvenile justice, experience home abuse, or use drugs or alcohol. Girls who experience (or are exposed) to multiple risk factors are at higher risk for entering (or getting further) involved in the juvenile justice system (PACE, 2002).

**Risk factors in the family**

Traditionally, girls are closely supervised in the home, especially during their formative years. Risk-taking behavior is discouraged and friends are carefully monitored by parents. However, the lives of abused and neglected girls do not necessarily reflect these traditional patterns and social controls. They often grow up in multi-problem homes where they are more likely to report that someone in their family was arrested. In addition, there are high rates of psychopathology among these families. These environments give young women numerous opportunities to learn and model aggressive and antisocial behavior (Acoca, 1999; Artz, 1998; Jessor, 1992; Richie et al., 2000).

Research shows that adolescent females experience more sexual abuse and at higher frequencies than do males. National statistics indicate as many as eight million girls are sexually abused before the age of 18 (Campbell, 1995). According to Wells (1994), “one out of every three females is a victim of sexual abuse; 70% to 90% of these sexual abuse victims are incest victims” (p. 5). Acoca (1999) noted that “one of the most universally shared attributes of female prisoners is a history of violent victimization” (p. 5).

Female adolescents who have been sexually abused have more serious problems with self-image, sexual attitudes, family relations, vocational and educational goals, and mastering their environment (Miller, Trapani, Fejes-Mendoza, Eggleston, & Dwiggins,
1995, p. 430). According to Richie et al. (2000), data also indicate that physical and sexual abuse and neglect lead to increased risk of arrest for violence among women, a pattern dissimilar to that identified for abused and neglected males. In addition, “victimization triggers girls’ entry into delinquency as they try to escape abusive environments. Adolescent females who are unable to end abuse through legal channels often run away and end up on the streets with few legitimate survival options” (p. 30).

**Risk factors in the young person**

Extensive data point to differences between male and female adolescents. According to Miller et al. (1995), “adolescent females experience more episodes of depression than males, attempt suicide more frequently, and exhibit lower levels of resilience. Females’ self-esteem diminishes, while young males’ self-concept and self-esteem improve” (p. 430).

Girls from families with lower socio-economic opportunities may seek recognition by adopting a bad-girl image when they realize their life aspirations will go unrealized. However, they also embrace traditional gender role expectations and work in stereotypically female jobs (Weiler, 1999).

Violent young women are likely to come from troubled or violent families. Their home life—characterized by poverty, divorce, parental death, abandonment, alcoholism and frequent abuse—leaves them quick to anger, distrust, and revenge (Weiler, 1999). Klein et al. (1993) noted that adolescents are the only age group whose mortality rates have increased in the United States in the past 20 years.

According to the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence (2004), there are five goals important to adolescents that may result in violence: achieving and maintaining high status; materialism and social identity; power; rough justice, social
control and self help; and defiance of authority. They noted that the function of violence for girls appears to reflect a rejection of male violence toward women and the need for self-protection. In addition, Artz (1998) hypothesized that a major factor in girls’ aggression toward other girls is a general negative view of females based on a personal low sense of self-worth, resulting from sexual abuse and an internalized belief in women’s inferiority.

Overall, in the 1990s there was an escalation in the number of girls arrested for drug-related offenses (Acoca, 1999). For example, in the State of Florida, “there was a 229% increase over the last decade in juvenile offenders referred for drug use. Three of four juvenile offenders in delinquency treatment programs admit to problems with drug or alcohol use” (Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, 2004, p. 3).

National Council on Crime and Delinquency (2000) data reveal that clear correlations exist between the victimization of girls and specific high-risk behaviors such as drug abuse. Researchers note that one reason for this close connection is the capacity for drugs to dull the psychological devastation brought about by physical and sexual violations (Acoca, 1999; Belknap, 1996). Acoca also noted how victimization and substance abuse often lead to multiple risky behaviors, such as truancy, unsafe sexual practices, and gang involvement.

In addition, many of the young women identified as at-risk experience a number of health problems including early pregnancy, serious physical maladies, and psychological troubles (Richie et al., 2000). In a survey of 1,000 girls in the California juvenile justice system, Acoca (1999) found that 88% of the girls had experienced serious physical health problems, 29% had been pregnant, and 53% had received psychiatric services.
Risk factors in the environment

Community. Several researchers have pointed out that all institutions (families, schools, and public agencies) are failing young women (Acoca, 1999; Belknap, 1996; Richie et al., 2000). According to American City and County (“Report Says Environment Fails,” 1993), “Since the 1970s, structural and demographic changes in the United States economy and society have caused a broad-based deterioration in the economic position of young adults” (p. 16). In Florida, the high mobility of families appears to be a factor that increases delinquency because many young people do not feel they have consistent ties to a community (Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, 2004). In other areas, the overall community turns away from this population, “rendering them invisible because female delinquency was seen as neither interesting nor important until the last few decades, and there is still a paucity of research on this topic” (Belknap, 1996, p. 5).

School. Researchers claim that, by the year 2020, the majority of students in America’s public schools will be living in circumstances that place them at-risk of educational failure (Rossi & Stringfield, 1995). In general, school failure increases young people’s risk for violence and delinquency, although poor school performance appears to have a stronger effect on girls than boys (Acoca, 1999; Weiler, 1999). According to Richie et al. (2000), “because expectations for early academic success are often higher for girls than boys, low social and interpersonal skills may elicit more negative responses from teachers, which in turn may place girls at greater risk for behavioral problems” (p. 32). Labeling students as at-risk, educationally handicapped, or even struggling subtly places blame on the students for their failures and does not take into account how the system is failing students who are not perceived as developing functional, or print-based, literacy. Historically, schools have provided a less-than
curriculum for students who have been perceived as lower-SES or nonelite (King & O’Brien, 2002).

Additionally, both Acoca (1999) and CRA (1998) pointed out that young women are often sexually harassed in today’s schools, which promotes a drop-out mentality among students who are already performing at a low level. In Florida, juvenile offenders typically come from single-parent households and are truants, dropouts, or are doing poorly in school (Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, 2004).

The National Council on Crime and Delinquency (2000), pointed out that the most statistically significant risk factor underlying girls’ offending is educational failure, especially during their middle-school years. Other key risk factors include an intergenerational pattern of incarceration, a history of victimization, and early sexual activity. An educational approach is likely to prove to be the most effective and economical gender-specific prevention strategy. (p. 1)

Media. Steele and Brown (1995) and Strasburger and Wilson (2002) indicated that the mass media, and the cultural views they present, are a significant information source for adolescent identity formation. They note how teens appropriate and transform media messages and images to help them make sense of the world, especially in regard to identity-related issues such as gender role learning, preparation for specific occupations, and the development of values and beliefs (Strasburger & Wilson, 2002).

Larson (1995) noted that one of the reasons youth may reach out for this public, shared information is for “the security of identification with other like-minded peers” (p. 548). A potential problem, however, is that the messages they receive in media about developmental issues may conflict with the other common forms of socialization.

As Arnett (1995) pointed out,

There is now a certain incoherence in the socialization process. We might say that there is a lack of integration in their (adolescents) socialization . . . which may
contribute to their alienation, as they attempt to sort out the dissonance between the socialization messages in the media they use and the socialization messages promoted by adults in their families, schools, and communities. (p. 530)

Today’s cultural climate maintains and nurtures the idea that teen-agers have their own media culture. Musicians and prototypes of teens depicted in media help to define and sustain the style, behavior, and mind-set of the modern teenager (Danesi, 1994, p. 126). However, as Klein et al. (1993) indicated, a negative aspect of this cultural environment is that media portrayals of risky behavior may also help promote or reinforce the behaviors through influences on individual values and risk perception. As noted by Huntemann and Morgan (2001), “the extremely wide range of ways that media can affect young people’s sense of identity makes this influence so complex, and so important” (p. 313).

**Developmental Issues in Adolescence**

**Identity formation**

In *The Adolescent Journey*, Levy-Warren (1996) identified adolescence as a developmental phase that spans the ages of 10 to 22. She noted that this is a period of time where fundamental psychological changes occur, and “and when identity, the stable sense of who a person is, forms. It is the time that a core psychological issue—achieving an independent identity, rooted in family but reaching out—is resolved” (p. xii).

During the teen years, boys and girls begin to ask questions about who they are and how they differ from their parents. This emerging sense of self is fragile and malleable as teens experiment with different appearances and behaviors. Adolescents begin to see the world in more complex ways. Changes include shifts in the perception of time, thinking capabilities, bodily definition, and social and cultural awareness (Danesi, 1994; Levy-Warren, 1996; Strasburger & Wilson, 2002).
Levy-Warren (1996) delineated adolescent identity development as moving through three phases: early adolescence, middle adolescence, and late adolescence. Early adolescents are predominantly concerned with becoming less dependent on their parents. They turn to their best friends to derive a sense of belonging. Middle adolescents are preoccupied with establishing themselves among their peers. They look to various group identifications at first, then to steady boyfriends and girlfriends. By late adolescence, the most important task is moving out into the world with some sense of self-definition. They become conscious of their ethnic and cultural origins, which gives them a larger sense of belonging. As Levy-Warren noted, “There is a substantial transformation of the sense of self, leading to greater autonomy, integrating all spheres of an adolescent’s life: physiological, cognitive, psychological, and social” (p. 6).

Physiologically, adolescents are trying to become familiar with their newly changing bodies, developing alternative ways to seek comfort and affection. They see themselves as having bodies that function in an adult manner, with reproductive capacities. Most teens are curious about the opposite sex and seek information about sexual norms, attitudes, and practices in their culture (Danesi, 1994; Levy-Warren, 1996; Strasburger & Wilson, 2002).

Cognitively, adolescents see themselves and the world in ways that dramatically differ from children. Levy-Warren (1996) gave a unique explanation:

This shift feels much like moving from being a non-reader to a reader, when letters suddenly become recognizable words, phrases, and sentences. Now ideas and concepts, the world of abstract thought, becomes comprehensible in a new way. Adolescents now find it possible to think about the thinking process. (p. 9)

Psychologically, adolescents experience a separation from childhood. In other words, they realize they have changed and therefore see the world differently. During this
process, adolescents take into account their characteristics, positive and negative, as they are searching for a cohesive image of themselves (Danesi, 1994; Levy-Warren, 1996).

**Bedroom culture**

Danesi (1994) pointed out that a teenager typically transforms her or his bedroom into a haven for protecting their vulnerable identity. Bedrooms seem to be particularly meaningful places, and concealing a bedroom has a biological basis. People are extremely vulnerable while sleeping, so it makes sense to keep these areas hidden or secret (Danesi, 1994).

An adolescent will fanatically guard access to his or her bedroom, a private space where his or her symbolic universe is defined through decorations (posters, photos), audio-visual equipment (stereos, DVD players, computers, appropriate music, televisions), and tokens of peer friendship (gifts, letters). According to Danesi, (1994), the bedroom is a “sacred space for the adolescent, a refuge and asylum from the world. Only ‘intimates’ are allowed to share that space symbolically. All other visits are annoying intrusions (including parents and siblings)” (p. 55).

In discussing identity formation, Brown, Dykers, Steele, and White (1994) and Steele and Brown (1995) agreed with Danesi’s point, noting that the bedroom is a safe, private space for many teens, where experimentation with possible selves can be conducted. They found that teen bedrooms are important havens often decorated to reflect teens’ sense of themselves and where they fit into the larger culture.

During adolescence, the social world is a constant source of interest, concern, and speculation. As they separate from their parents, adolescents turn to their social and cultural worlds to gain some sense of independent self-identification (Levy-Warren, 1996). Adolescents spend more time alone or with friends and less time with parents.
This increased independence provides teens with opportunities to make decisions that may be unhealthy. Dryfoos (1992) claimed that “as many as one in four children in the United States, seven million of those aged 10 to 17, are at high risk of failing to mature into responsible adulthood unless immediate interventions are made” (p. 128).

**Physical Changes and External Pressures**

While young women are dealing with psychological changes, they are also dealing with extensive physical changes. At this stage, young women become more aware of how their physical state does or does not meet society’s standards of beauty. As noted by Debold, Wilson, and Malave (1993), “girls become looked at, objects of beauty (or not), models for idealized or fantasized relationships” (p. 14).

Psychologists note that the loss of voice or self-esteem is a phenomenon that has come to be associated with the developmental process of adolescent females (Brown, 1991; Pipher, 1994). Young women “hit the wall, which is made up of blocks containing all the negative messages young women receive from society about their bodies, their minds, and their worth. Through this process, they begin to recognize that the world functions in terms of power dynamics and that it is women who do not possess the power” (Debold et al., 1993, p. 14).

According to research, less attractive young women often judge themselves as not worthy of positive relationships and therefore may enter into abusive relationships (Acoca, 1999). Community Research Associates (1998) noted, “this is particularly true for young women who have experienced sexual abuse as children and so carry confused feelings and thoughts into adolescence about the purpose of their bodies” (p. 18). In addition, more attractive girls may struggle to be recognized for their intellectual abilities and also face sexual harassment before they know how to respond. These external
pressures influence many young women to develop harmful eating patterns such as anorexia or bulimia, or simply to develop a lifelong negative self-image (Pipher, 1994).

Four factors have been identified by Community Research Associates (1998) as key for an adolescent to be able to deal with these life changes. The first is a connection to at least one adult in a nonexploitive relationship. Typically, young women will place their relationships with others above abstract rules or regulations (such as curfews). The second factor is achieving a certain measure of success in school. To assist at-risk youth, research suggests that teachers should adapt teaching methods to reflect what is known about the relational, in-context learning styles of young women (CRA, 1998). In addition, an atmosphere free of sexual bantering and harassment would help create a productive learning environment. The third identified factor is that of having a form of spiritual connectedness. Young women need to be spiritually involved, whether through organized religion or other activities (such as gardening, keeping a journal, or meditating). The fourth factor is living in a family environment where there are low levels of family stress. This factor points to the role of family dynamics in shaping how a young woman perceives herself in the social universe (CRA, 1998; Flansburg, 1991; Pipher, 1994).

Risk-taking behaviors

Levy-Warren (1996) noted the cultural pressures affecting today’s adolescents: the earlier onset of puberty, the rise in adolescent eating disorders, the threat of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, the danger of alcohol and drug abuse, and increasingly competitive school and work environments. Today’s teens face tough decisions regarding a number of dangerous behaviors such as smoking, drug use, and early sexual activity. There appears to be no doubt that adolescence is a time of experimentation with reckless behaviors. Some of this risk-taking may be a function of
how teens view themselves “as unique and exceptional, which in turn can lead to a feeling of invulnerability to negative consequences” (Strasburger & Wilson, 2002, p. 15).

Jessor (1992) noted how

Considerable research has shown that adolescent risk behaviors are functional, purposive, instrumental, and goal-directed, and that the goals involved are often those that are central in normal adolescent development. It is not difficult to see that these behaviors can be instrumental in gaining peer acceptance and respect, in establishing autonomy from parents, in repudiating the values of conventional authority, in coping with anxiety and frustration, or in affirming maturity and marking a transition toward a more adult status. The centrality of these behaviors helps to explain why they are so intractable to change. (p. 22)

Media literacy and at-risk adolescents

As already noted, the educational, criminal justice and medical communities now recognize that media plays an active role in promoting risk-taking behavior in youth and adolescents (Behson, 2002; Hallett, 2003; Steyer, 2002; Strasburger & Wilson, 2002; Villani, 2001). Research shows that at-risk adolescents who become media literate gain extensive benefits, including increased self-esteem and awareness of how media impacts their worldviews (Steyer, 2002; Strasburger, 2002). However, Joe Behson (2002) of the New York State Office of Children and Family noted that little has been done to engage high-risk American youth actively in media literacy curriculum.

Behson coauthored the first media literacy curriculum for adjudicated youth, which has been presented to over 6,000 high-risk youth in New York State. In 1994, Behson and Dennis Moriarty began developing a program that was implemented in 64 residential and community-based settings. An interdisciplinary staff was trained to teach media literacy curriculum and a 6-year study was instituted to evaluate shifts in how children perceived media in their lives. According to Behson (2002) data indicate that the at-risk youth were able to show “meaningful shifts in understanding, attitudes, and
behaviors following completion of the media literacy program. They demonstrated an improved understanding of how media worked and also were able to make the connection between media messages and their own values and behavior” (p. 40). Additionally, Behson noted that anecdotal evidence provided by staff indicates that youth were able to transfer the skills obtained through media literacy curriculum to other rehabilitative treatment areas.

Examples of other media literacy programs designed for at-risk youth include *Flashpoint*, which was developed by the Massachusetts Committee on Criminal Justice, The Byrne Memorial Fund, and the Bureau of Criminal Justice. According to Bundelmann (2002), *Flashpoint* is a 12-session educational group-based program used with high-risk youth already involved with the juvenile justice system. The program combines media literacy and critical thinking skills, and participants learn about the messages in media presentations, how to analyze the form and content of those presentations, and how to resist influences promoting violence, substance abuse, or prejudice. A central concept of the program is to understand the flashpoints in their own lives that may lead to violence or other antisocial or inappropriate behaviors. For example,

The manipulation of flashpoints by media is explored—the moment when feelings are translated into actions. The adolescents view an exciting scene that leads to a violent climax. They then analyze the video, sound, and editing techniques used to stimulate the viewer. In this way, participants can explore their own vulnerability to agitation, as well as practice cognitive skills that delay and reduce impulsive responses. Beliefs that promote aggressive or violent responses (such as: violence gains peer respect; or, victims do not suffer), and which might be reinforced as a result of media influence, can be modified. Social skills, particularly those related to problem solving and conflict resolution, are enhanced. (Moore et al., 2000, p. 24)
Additionally, Moore et al. (2000) noted that participants in the *Flashpoint* program demonstrated an understanding that media is used to sell products and also to transmit and influence social values. Participants also reported an increased awareness of how media distorts information, such as minimizing the consequences for violent behavior.

King and O’Brien (2002) and Emery and Rother (1999) pointed to how traditional school programs have diminished the self-worth of at-risk students because they face what they perceive as unattainable tasks. According to Emery and Rother, One of the characteristics of at-risk students is that they possess low levels of literacy. This characterization results from assessment practices based on the ability to interpret and generate certain forms of print texts. Because at-risk students are not particularly successful in these contexts, assumptions are made about their intellectual abilities. (p. 103)

However, the authors found that these students are developing digital literacies and intermedial competence that is not really recognized in today’s educational environment.

In The Literacy Lab, a program designed for at-risk high school students, King and O’Brien (2002) developed an approach that “capitalized on student free choice and balanced their daily challenges and successes through using tasks made possible by using technology tools typically reserved for high track, more privileged students” (p. 243). Through developing multi-literacy projects, such as web pages and video-recording, participants improved their reading and writing skills (King & O’Brien).

Additional media literacy grassroots efforts are surfacing to assist at-risk adolescent youth. These efforts are being developed with a variety of methodologies, such as The Beat Within web site, which provides an opportunity for adjudicated youth to express themselves. According to Joe Behson (2002), another new program underway
is Securicor New Century, a 19-lesson media-based character education curriculum for juvenile justice populations.

When discussing media literacy programs and at-risk youth, Budelmann (2002) indicates how media literacy is regarded as a promising strategy in juvenile justice, because substantial anecdotal evidence and some empirical data suggest that media-literate youth are more likely to avoid violence, substance abuse, and other negative behaviors. Proponents of media literacy curriculum believe that this is a cost-effective and beneficial prevention program for at-risk adolescent youth (Behson, 2002; Best & Kellner, 2003; Bundelmann, 2002; Emery & Rother, 1999; King & O’Brien, 2002; Moore et al., 2000; New Jersey Assembly Task Force on Adolescent Violence, 1999).

Music Video

Overview of Popular Music

Historically, new forms of music have caused concern among adults that adolescents are being corrupted by the music, either through the lyrics, beat, or both (Christianson & Roberts, 1998). Strasburger and Wilson (2002) referred to this phenomenon as “media panic,” where adults and society in general tend to fear a new medium, especially music, as it develops. In the 1980s, The Parents Resource Music Center (PRMC) raised concerns regarding popular music lyrics. The PRMC, headed by Tipper Gore and other wives of prominent politicians, argued that youth were being negatively affected by popular music lyrics that focused on sex, violence, and suicide. They developed an extensive public relations campaign, which resulted in the voluntary labeling of record albums to inform parents about songs containing explicit lyrics. Since then, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the National Coalition on Television Violence, various politicians, Children Now, and other consumer groups have raised
concerns about the impact of music and music video lyrics and visuals being consumed by adolescents. The affective impact of music has been well documented. In addition, using a multi-sensory format is recognized as an excellent approach to marketing specific products, services, or ideas (Baran, 2002). It is also acknowledged that one of the primary roles of music video is to sell the song and artist being promoted through and on the video (Christianson & Roberts, 1998; Hansen & Hansen, 2000; Jhally, 1994).

Adolescents spend more time with music than any other medium (Christianson & Roberts, 1998). However, studies conflict regarding the amount of time American adolescents spend watching music videos, ranging from about one hour (Strasburger & Wilson, 2002) to 5 hours per day (Roberts et al., 2002). Variations in study methodology, age and ethnicity of respondents, geographical region, and availability of cable systems may account for these differences (Christianson & Roberts, 1998).

In 2002, the Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) published a report authored by Dr. Joel Federman noting how the media industry is dealing with the controversial issues of sex and violence in media. Specifically, the report gave information about the current state of regulation or lack thereof for each media industry. Findings about the recording industry indicated that, although recordings with lyrics reflecting substance abuse, sex, or violence are now labeled, the labels are relatively useless in determining the explicitness of the content. Therefore, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has suggested revisions in the policy, noting that the music industry is marketing explicit products to teens, placing advertising in media that would reach a majority of substantial percentage of children under 17. In addition, the FTC found in its undercover shopper survey of 383 music stores nationally that children ages 13 to 16 were able to buy stickered CDs 85% of the time (Federman, 2002, p. 15).
These facts are an important reminder that the music industry is determined to reach the youth market and plans to continue advertising the stickered products in the most popular teen media venues, such as music television.

**History of Music Videos**

Music Television (MTV) has been credited with introducing the first music videos in 1981 when the network began airing on cable television systems. However, visual interpretations of music have existed since the talkie movies, where songs were introduced with visual components. In the 1960s, record marketing executives in the recording industry recognized a demand for music on television. They introduced short promotional films and supported such programming as *American Bandstand*, on which bands played their hit songs for live audiences. The promotional films were used primarily to increase worldwide exposure of the artists. Once record executives realized videos also boosted sales, there was more focus on developing tools that incorporated both music and television, such as *Casey Kasem’s America’s Top Ten* syndicated show (Christianson & Roberts, 1998; Hansen & Hansen, 2000; Roberts et al., 2002).

MTV became an instant hit with youth audiences. Because of the limited access to cable programming, the network was available initially in only a few American markets. In 1982, MTV launched its now famous advertising campaign, “I Want My MTV!” which encouraged consumers to call their cable operators and demand the service.

MTV has since grown into a huge empire, reaching over 80 million subscriber homes (Roberts et al., 2002). There are several imitators of the format, including BET, VHI, MTV2, CMT, as well as dance clubs, clothing stores, and other public venues in
which music videos are played (Christianson & Roberts, 1998; Hansen & Hansen, 2000; Roberts et al., 2002).

MTV claims to have a very wide viewership among American teens and young adults. The 2003 survey data published in the Kaiser Family Foundation ‘Reaching the MTV Generation’ report indicates that “three of four (75%) of 16- to 24-year olds watch MTV, including nearly 6 in 10 (58%) who watch at least once a week or more, and 2 in 10 (20%) who watch for an hour or more every day” (p. 7).

MTV is recognized as a mainstream institution in pop culture because it has completely changed how the music industry operates. Music television also has transformed other visual media, such as advertising, film, and television “through the use of the MTV look—fast-moving images, loud music, quick cutting, and other stylistic devices” (Roberts et al., 2002, p. A-3).

**What Is a Music Video?**

Music videos are a type of commercial for popular music, promoting an artist’s image to consumers much as other advertising promotes specific products, services, or ideas. As such, music videos transport these images into the homes of users, providing a closer connection between the audience and artist. When music is transformed into both a visual and audio experience, the song takes on a whole new meaning (Christianson & Roberts, 2003; Lull, 1991; Roberts et al., 2002; Strasburger & Wilson, 2002).

The communication objectives for music videos are to gain and hold the viewer’s attention, establish, or maintain an artist’s image, sell that image and the products associated with it, and perhaps carry direct or indirect messages about specific behaviors (Abt, 1987; Christianson & Roberts, 2003; Frith, 1988; Roberts et al., 2002; Strasburger & Wilson, 2002). According to Strasburger and Wilson (2002), music videos are a
unique form of interaction, providing the viewer/listener with a nonlinear, impressionistic broadcast. Lull (1991) pointed to how music video “reverses the normative aesthetic and semiotic relationship between picture and sound in television and film, in that the visuals are there to enhance the sound rather than the other way around” (p. 11).

The concept was introduced in 1981, when MTV began airing in the United States. Music videos are often produced using a dreamlike sequencing, such as structural discontinuity and decentering, abrupt scene shifts, an unpredictable flow of images, a lack of narrative, and structural reliance on memory retrieval (Abt, 1987; Aufderheide, 1986; Christenson & Roberts, 1998; Kinder, 1984). Through using this dreamlike sequencing, music videos are essentially ignoring traditional boundaries between an image and its real-life referent, between past and present, character and performance (Aufderheide, 1986).

Music videos are an identifiable and unique popular artist genre. . . . Sometimes they tell a story, but just as often they present a dream-like and elliptical sequence of images lacking an apparent narrative structure. At times music videos make logical thematic connections between lyrics and visuals, but just as often the video component takes off in its own direction, unconnected to anything in the song but the beat. (Christenson & Roberts, 1998, p. 139)

The presentational formats of music videos can be divided into two primary types: the performance video and the concept video. In the performance video, the musical performer(s) sings the song. In the concept video, a story is told that may or may not reflect the lyrics. The musician(s) are featured as central characters, but they enact a drama. The drama may offer a coherent story, which is referred to as a “narrative” video. In contrast, conceptual videos present an impressionistic stream of images rather than a logical sequence of events. However, most videos are hybrids, where they incorporate at least some form of artist performance along with a nonperformance related insert (Abt, 1987; Christenson & Roberts, 1998; Strasburger & Wilson, 2002).
An interesting aspect of the music video industry is how adolescence is portrayed in terms of identity crisis, rebellion, generation gaps, and persistent family strife. The themes of rebellion and alienation are consistent themes in popular music, and the videos reflect those themes (Christianson & Roberts, 1998; Hansen & Hansen, 2000; Villani, 2001).

**Existing Research about the Effects of Music Videos**

Interestingly, the issues of public concern about how music videos affect youth have remained consistent since the 1980s. Critical themes that emerged during that time include the visual style and characteristics of music video, its potential inhibition of imagination, the violent, sexual, and sexist imagery that characterizes its content, and its role as advertising for musicians and the music industry (Abt, 1987; Aufderheide, 1986; Rich, Woods, Goodman, Emans, & DuRant, 1998; Roberts & Christianson, 2001; Strasburger & Wilson, 2002).

It was surprising to find that relatively little research has been conducted about the effects of music videos and popular music on today’s youth (Christianson & Roberts, 1998; Rich et al., 1998; Smith & Boyson, 2002; Strasburger & Wilson, 2002). Strasburger and Wilson note,

> Despite the fact that rock ‘n’ roll is practically middle-aged, and MTV just turned 20 in 2001, research on popular music and music videos is in its infancy. There has been surprisingly little research about either, despite massive public concern about violent or sexually suggestive lyrics and videos. In addition, little attention has been paid to how these immensely popular media might be harnessed to provide pro-social or health-related messages. (p. 298)

Christianson and Roberts (1998) claimed that, despite the public outcry regarding content of music videos, “there are no published analyses of lyrics in the 1980s and early 1990s careful and thorough enough to provide a solid basis for gauging current trends” (p. 120).
A majority of the studies conducted regarding music videos and their audiences are content analyses of the videos or experiments determining reactions to specific genres of music videos (Brown & Campbell, 1986; Cooper, 1985; Hansen, 1989; DuRant et al., 1997; Hansen & Hansen, 1990; Johnson, Jackson, & Gatto, 1995; Peterson & Pfost, 1989; Rich et al., 1998; Roberts et al., 2002; Rubin, West, & Mitchell, 2001; Sherman & Dominick, 1986; Smith & Boyson, 2002; Sommers-Flanagan, Sommers-Flanagan, & Davis, 1993; Strouse & Buerkel-Rothfuss, 1995; Sun & Lull, 1986; Toney & Weaver, 1994; Waite, Hillbrand, & Foster, 1992; Wells, 1990). Anderson, Carnagey, and Eubanks (2003) pointed to the lack of research regarding the effects of songs with violent lyrics.

There are no studies that employ qualitative techniques specifically addressing how at-risk adolescents use music videos. Experimental or survey analysis studies that address at-risk adolescents and music videos are focused on how this population chooses heavy metal or rap music to assuage their feelings. The researchers found that heavy metal or rap do not specifically cause at-risk behaviors, but rather the music reflects the negative feelings (sense of disenfranchisement) that this population feels. Findings indicate that at-risk adolescents are drawn to the music that reflects their feelings, which are those of despondency, suicide, and other difficult self-identity issues—rather than the music shaping their negative perceptions (Arnett, 1991; Christianson & Roberts, 1998; Hansen & Hansen, 1990). Roe’s (1995) theory of “media delinquency” supported these findings, where he claimed that teens gravitate toward objectionable lyrics and visuals simply because they feel alienated, rather than the lyrics causing the alienation.

Concerns about Music Videos

There is continued societal concern about how sex, violence, and sexual violence depicted in media, specifically television, movies, and video games, are affecting
American youth (AAP, 1996; Rich et al., 1998; Roberts et al., 2002; Strouse & Buerkel-Rothfuss, 1995). Over 3000 studies (Rich et al., 1998) conducted over the last 40 years document that exposure to television violence contributes to learning aggressive thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors in both children and adults (Smith & Boyson, 2002). Content analyses of music videos reflect that a substantial number feature violence, and that the violence is sanitized, not chastised, and is presented in a realistic context (Roberts & Christianson, 1998; Rich et al., 1998; Smith & Boyson, 2002).

Music videos have played a part in developing the MTV generation, a group of youth that grew up watching music videos, determining what is acceptable through the presentation of images designed to impact them (Steyer, 2001; Strasburger & Wilson, 2002). There are justifiable concerns about how music videos have shaped the perceptions of adolescents about male-female relationships. A myriad of studies indicated that women are typically portrayed in stereotypical sexual ways, primarily as sexual objects showcasing the male video stars (Hansen & Hansen, 2000; Rich et al., 1998; Sommers-Flanagan & Davis, 1993; Strouse & Buerkel-Rothfuss, 1995; Toney & Weaver, 1994; Whitely, 1997). Sherman and Dominick (1986) pointed out how the emphasis in music television is on adolescent sex, where sex is depicted “without any emotional bond, without any commitment” (p. 91). There is also recognition that both sexes are portrayed at the extreme ends of sex-role stereotyping: men as more adventuresome, aggressive, and domineering; and women as more affectionate, nurturing, dependent, and fearful (Hansen & Hansen, 2000; Roberts & Christianson, 1998; Strasburger & Wilson, 2002).

In their study of gender and race in music video violence, Rich et al. (1998) provided an interesting orientation by noting media as “one-way transmissions of
sequenced content with expressive systems of symbolic and explicit meanings . . .
accurately anticipating that music television would prove particularly potent at evoking
feelings, attitudes, and social values” (p. 670). As they predicted, the results of their
study indicate that adolescents are modeling the violent behaviors presented by attractive
video stars, primarily because the actions are presented as normal and acceptable.
Concerns about exposure to music video violence include how viewers are impacted
psychologically, learning aggression, fear, and emotional desensitization (Smith &
Boyson, 2002). In addition, pediatricians are worried about how music videos are
developing adolescent normative expectations about conflict resolution, race, and male-
female relationships (Rich et al., 1998).

Hansen and Hansen (2000) found that the effects of rock music videos could be
predicted by the thematic content of the videos, presenting evidence that the content
primes viewers’ cognitive schemas. In other words, the videos predictably influenced
viewer impressions and social judgments through setting up an interpretation process that
was not formerly in place. Concept music videos were interspersed with unconnected
segments of violence and research showed a stronger connection between “various
behavioral and attitudinal indices and exposure to music videos than any other media
genre” (Strouse & Buerkel-Rothfuss, 1995, p. 506).

A significant number of experimental studies also indicate that music plays a
substantial role in shaping how teens and college undergraduates perceive, interpret,
evaluate, and respond to stimuli presented in music videos. For example,

• Violence in videos made viewers more antagonistic toward women and more
  likely to condone violent behaviors (Johnson et al., 1995; Peterson & Pfost,
  1989).
• Videos depicting antisocial behaviors increased acceptance of observed antisocial behaviors (Johnson et al., 1995; Hansen & Hansen, 1990).

• Highly gender-stereotyped videos increased acceptance of gender-stereotyped behavior (Hansen, 1989; Hansen & Hansen, 1988).

• Viewers were more accepting of premarital sex after watching sexual videos (Greeson & Williams, 1986; Strouse & Buerkel-Rothfuss, 1995).

• Rap videos in general reduced academic aspirations among African-American teens (Johnson et al., 1995).

Lyrics

Lyrics are an important part of popular music, providing part of “the total music gestalt that provides emotional and social rewards” (Christianson & Roberts, 1998, p. 62). Cooper (1985) pointed to the important relationship between lyrics and tonal music as a form of communication. She suggested that popular music with lyrics has a powerful impact on audiences as a medium of socialization because of the “documented impact of tonal music on the affective and cognitive processes of the listener” (p. 504). In other words, the lyrics play an important cognitive role, providing a language that recipients can identify and understand.

Lyrics are an important element in the enjoyment of music. Most people have experienced using a special song to represent a relationship, mood, or life-altering situation. Listeners remember these key lyrics, and the specific singer who performed them (Abt, 1987; Frith, 1988; Shepherd, 1990).

In contrast, several studies addressed how the beat of the music is often more recognizable to users than the lyrics (Gunderson, 1985; Rouner, 1990; Strasburger & Wilson, 2002). The American Academy of Pediatrics (1996) noted that teenagers often do not know the lyrics or fully comprehend their meaning. Mondegreens, defined as the penchant listeners have for remembering lyrics incorrectly, have been documented
extensively by Jon Carroll, a columnist for the *San Francisco Chronicle* (Christianson & Roberts, 1998). Interestingly, Hansen and Hansen (2000) found that, despite low levels of lyric comprehension, listeners were able to discern themes in the music and construct meanings for the songs.

Christianson and Roberts (1998) also found there are multiple meanings to a song, depending on the individual differences of the listeners, such as age, gender and race. They cited examples where, when lyrics are understood by all listeners, the meanings of the lyrics are disputed, leading to the conclusion that there is often no correct interpretation of a song, but rather a multitude of potential meanings.

Specific purposes that lyrics may serve include providing support for ambivalence about growing up, providing group identification, learning sex roles, providing a focus for collective rebellion movements (such as civil rights and anti-war), and learning about love (Frith, 1988; Hansen & Hansen, 2000; Larson & Kubey, 1983; Lull, 1991). Rouner (1990) pointed out that the media orientation of the user (including exposure, reliance, and involvement) are key factors in determining the impact of lyrical passages on cognitive and affective systems.

Exposure is the amount and frequency of putting oneself into the listening and viewing context. Reliance is depending on the music’s content for some amount of information or role guidance relative to its perceived use. Involvement is a complex concept that is an interaction between audiences and media contents. (p. 99)

Interestingly, content analyses indicate that, although song lyrics have become more sexually explicit over the last 50 years, romantic love is still the most prevalent theme (Hansen & Hansen, 2000; Strasburger & Wilson, 2002).

Social concerns about popular music often involve the anti-social messages perceived in the lyrics. Assumptions about the lyrics include the belief that the
information is consciously or subconsciously integrated into the cognitive system of the
listeners. One reason for assuming this relationship is the well-known impact of the
thematic repetition of lyrics. “These recognizable elements of popular songs are also
called ‘hooks,’ referring to their ability to capture and hold the attention of the audience.
The hook is usually repeated several times within a song” (Lull, 1991, p. 4). Logically,
the potential for lyrics to influence attitudes, values or behaviors depends on how the

Strasburger and Wilson (2002), claimed there are no studies documenting a
cause-and-effect relationship between sexy or violent lyrics and adverse behavioral
effects. However, according to Anderson, Carnagey, and Eubanks (2003), “There are
valid reasons to worry about the potentially harmful effects of violent music lyrics.
Numerous studies have shown that aggressive words can prime aggressive thoughts,
perceptions, and behaviors. Such effects can occur when the stimulus has not been
consciously recognized” (p. 960). Five experiments conducted by Anderson, Carnagey,
and Eubanks demonstrate a direct relationship between exposure to violent lyrics with an
increase in aggressive thoughts. They point to the implications of violent lyrics’ impact
on the cognitive schema of listeners, thereby having a direct influence on their social
interactions.

Theories of Adolescent Music Video Audiences

Uses and Gratifications

Themes that consistently emerge in the existing literature about adolescents and
music videos are the following:

- Music serves as an important social text to adolescents.
- Music helps adolescents form identity through group identity.
- Music videos provide a text for learning about trends in clothing and
• dance moves.
• Interpretation of music lyrics and semiotics depends extensively on individual differences among youth.
• Music is an important tool used for mood enhancement (either to increase or decrease specific feelings).
• There is evidence that youth are learning specific behaviors from viewing videos, where learning takes place incidentally, observationally, and through role modeling. (Abt, 1987; Auferheide, 1986; DuRant et al, 1997; Hansen & Hansen, 1990, 2000; Johnson et al., 1995; Peterson & Pfoert, 1989; Rich et al., 1998; Roberts et al., 2002; Rubin et al., 2001; Smith & Boyson, 2002; Sommers-Flanagan et al., 1993; Strasburger & Wilson, 2002; Strouse & Buerkel-Rothfuss, 1995; Sun & Lull, 1986; Waite et al, 1992; Wells, 1990).

Primary uses and gratifications involve the affective, or mood enhancing, aspect of music. The survey and content analysis data suggest that teens are most interested in music that will enhance their state of mind, whether positive or negative. Teens report that music helps them manage their world. When teens are lonely, seek distraction, or want to be in a certain mood, music is the medium they choose to accomplish the task (Abt, 1987; Christianson & Roberts, 1998; Hansen & Hansen, 2000; Roberts et al., 2002; Wells, 1990). Wells (1990) pointed to the sociology of emotions, which explains how music can be used to evoke emotions, manage stress, alleviate negative feelings, relieve boredom and generate physiological changes.

Christianson and Roberts (1998) suggested five primary uses and gratifications categories for how adolescents use popular music and music videos:

• Cognition: using media for information about trends, cultures.
• Diversion: gaining emotional, or affective, rewards from listening.
• Social utility: facilitate relationships with friends through discussion of the music and videos.
• Withdrawal: to establish barriers between the self and others
• Personal identity: formation of a clear sense of self, seeking moral guidance and social status.

Music videos give music consumers something to visualize, recall, and make connection with regarding a specific song. The videos leave most viewers with a visual
impression of the music. This visual aspect may inhibit the creativity normally inspired by music listening, when the listener creates a vision of the song through imagination (Abt, 1987; Hansen & Hansen, 2002; Wells, 1990). Sun and Lull (1986) found that respondents saw music videos as pictorial translations of the songs, helping them interpret and understand the meaning of the music.

Popular music is physiologically arousing, has psychosocial benefits, and the content provides young people with information about society, social and gender roles, and behavior. It acts, in essence, as an “agent of socialization” (Hansen & Hansen, 2000, p. 176).

Gender

There appears to be substantial differences between how young males and females use music. Toney and Weaver (1994) made an interesting point when noting that “gender is at the very core of popular music appreciation” (p. 567). In other words, gender is a critical factor mediating the appreciation of specific musical genres. Within this scope, individuals are in a continual process of meaning making, observing and interpreting events in their social environment and constructing their personal social reality (Frith, 1988; Leming, 1987; Lull, 1991). According to Christenson and Roberts (1998), the existing research points to three primary gender differences: the separation between female and male musical preferences (females prefer pop, males prefer rock ‘n roll); males are more likely to adopt the nonmainstream music choices (i.e., punk); and white female youth show more appreciation for African-American music, such as soul, disco, funk and rhythm ‘n blues (p. 89).

When managing emotion, females are more likely to use music to lift their spirits, relieve feelings of loneliness, or deal with being upset. Males more consistently use
music to increase their energy level and seek stimulation (Larson & Kubey, 1983; Roe, 1995; Wells, 1990). Therefore, the nature of the lyrics may also provide reason for differences in gender tastes. For example, hard rock and heavy metal songs are often laced with misogynist or aggressive messages that would generally not appeal to adolescent girls, who prefer soft, danceable rock songs (Christianson & Roberts, 1998; Frith, 1988; Strouse & Buerkel-Rothfuss, 1995).

It is also important to note that musical preferences are influenced by how children are culturally socialized into gender roles. Girls are expected to fit in and be popular, beautiful, deferent, and nurturing. Boys are expected to stand out as independent, tough, aggressive, and competitive (Christianson & Roberts, 1998; Hansen & Hansen, 2000; Rich et al., 1998; Sommers-Flanagan & Davis, 1993; Toney & Weaver, 1994). Music choices can reflect this basic cultural socialization, but the generalization is not absolute. However, it would be remiss not to mention that a majority of music videos reinforce these stereotyped notions of gender, as many music videos “tend to be chauvinistic, violent, and laden with sexual images where women are presented as sex objects” (Strouse & Buerkel-Rothfuss, 1995, p. 2)

Age is an important variable when determining differences in music preferences between males and females. It appears that rigidity in gender choices is reflected primarily in middle school adolescents, who are in the process of determining their gender role identities (Strasburger & Wilson, 2002). Christianson and Roberts (1998) claimed that when gender roles are more equally defined (such as on college campuses or in preadolescence), that there are fewer differences in musical tastes.

Hansen and Hansen (2000) found that, among young women, a liking for MTV is correlated with attitudes toward sexuality. The 1986 study by Greeson and Williams
indicated that young women who watch MTV regularly find the sex in music videos more enjoyable; and Strouse and Buerkel-Rothfuss (1995) found that MTV exposure can increase college girls’ acceptance of sexual harassment.

**Social learning and cultivation theories**

The theories of social learning (Bandura) and cultivation (Gerbner) are consistently mentioned throughout the studies pertaining to music videos (American Academy of Pediatricians, 1996; Anderson, Carnagey & Eubanks, 2003; Greeson & Williams, 1986; Rich et al., 1998; Roberts, et al, 2002; Smith & Boyson, 2002; Strasburger & Wilson, 2002). Findings indicate that social learning is taking place during the consumption of music video imagery and audio, whether through incidental, role-playing, or observational processing of information. Viewers are watching videos primarily for entertainment but also to gain information about sexual roles, current trends in fashion, and language (slang) development. Christenson and Roberts (1998) claimed

Music industry apologists who . . . deny any possibility that their products might influence America’s hip, sophisticated young consumers ignore the fact that most human learning is incidental. . . . To say that music is ‘just’ entertainment or that lyrics are not the primary draw in no way precludes the possibility of influence. (p. 7)

However, the literature also points to the concept of individual differences; noting that each individual processes information differently. In other words, it is important to keep the idea of individual differences in mind when reviewing how music and music videos affect audiences (Hansen & Hansen, 2000; Roberts & Christianson, 2002; Sun & Lull, 1986, Wells, 1990). As Christianson and Roberts (1998) pointed out, “meaning . . . is constructed, and what any message ‘means’ depends at least on much of what the individual brings to the message as what the message provides the individual (p. 31).”
Media Literacy

Media’s Role in Society

Mass media can have a pervasive influence on worldviews, as they are now the primary tools many cultures use to transmit ideologies, cultural norms, beliefs, values, and other important components of human relations. Television, in particular, is recognized as a social educator that has a powerful influence on social life, politics, consumer behavior, and the shaping of public sentiment (Alvermann, 2002; Campbell, 2000; von Feilitzen, 1999; Luke, 1997). Probably the most important aspect of media literacy is recognizing popular culture’s central role in today’s world. Media is the primary disseminator of popular culture and, as such, perpetuates which race and ethnic groups have cultural capital (Alvermann, 2002; Cortés, 2001; Kellner, 1998a). As noted by Huntemann and Morgan (2001),

The continued monitoring of the symbolic environment is essential to understanding media effects . . . we may shed a little more light on how children integrate and negotiate symbolic media messages with the various and intertwined daily influences on their conception of who they are in relation to the world in which they live. (p. 319)

The media diet of young people has far exceeded any expectations of society. Substantial facts and statistics are readily available regarding daily media consumption by U.S. audiences, especially children. Steyer (2002) claimed that, according to a University of Maryland study, children spend more than 40 hours per week on average with some form of media. The primary media used by children aged 8 to 18, sometimes two or more simultaneously, are the Internet, radio, video games, computer, magazines, TV, phone, cell phone, and different formats for music (Campbell, 2000; Rideout, Roberts, & Foehr, 2005; Steyer, 2002). In contrast, they spend less than 17 hours a week
with their parents. In addressing this juxtaposition, Steyer (2002) posed the question:

“Now, which is the parent in this picture?” (p. 5).

According to Huntemann and Morgan (2001),

Every year a child sees 20,000 TV commercials, and, over his or her youth, will spend more time watching TV than in school . . . the quantity and redundancy of mass media images accumulate as part of the overall childhood experience. This accumulated experience contributes to the cultivation of a child’s values, beliefs, dreams, and expectations, which shape the adult identity a child will carry and modify throughout his or her life. The potential contribution of the media to identity development is immense. (p. 311)

**Concerns about the Impact of Media**

Public concerns abound regarding the media’s impact on a child’s values, behavior, and self-image. Media play a pervasive role in society, disseminating multiple messages in a variety of formats. The avalanche of information has generated concerns about the effects in the areas of health, public policy, academic performance, and cultural development. The role of media in shaping perceptions of self and society cannot be ignored or considered irrelevant (Harris, 1994; Potter, 1998). According to Huntemann and Morgan (2001), “all together, the massive flow of popular images, representations, and symbolic modes disseminated by the media profoundly shape what young people think about the world and how they perceive themselves in relation to it” (p. 309).

A primary concern noted by physicians, educators, and criminal justice professionals is that minimal attention has been given to the educational, psychological and physiological impact of a child’s media diet (AAP, 1999; Alvermann, 2002; Brown, 2001; Christakis, Zimmerman, DiGiuseepe, & McCarty, 2004; Cortés, 2000; Steyer, 2002). For example, pediatricians are noting differences in brain development and attitudes based on media content and use (AAP). Physician concerns include the impact of media on abilities to make independent decisions, lack of quiet time and development
of the “two-minute” mind (AAP; Healy, 1998;). In addition, research indicates that exposure to negative, sexual and violent imagery can impact a child’s cognitive abilities, physiology, emotional and spiritual health (Strasburger & Wilson, 2001).

Probably one of the most disturbing trends is the lack of “quiet time” in children’s lives. In 1998 the American Academy of Pediatrics recommended that parents remove television sets from children’s bedrooms and discourage television viewing for children younger than 2 years of age. The Academy’s reasoning was:

Too much television can impinge negatively on young minds in several ways, including:

1. Higher levels of TV viewing correlate with lowered academic performance, especially reading scores; the ‘two-minute’ mind easily becomes impatient with any material requiring depth of processing.

2. The nature of the stimulus may predispose some children to attention problems. The fast-paced, attention grabbing features of children’s programming were modeled after advertising research, which determined that this technique is the best way to engage the brain involuntarily.

3. The brain’s prefrontal cortex is responsible for planning, organizing and sequencing behavior for self-control, moral judgment and attention. Some research suggests that ‘mindless’ TV or video games may impoverish the development of this part of the brain. (Healy, 1998, p. 2)

In addition, a controversial 2004 study in the journal *Pediatrics* indicated that too much television may harm the attention spans of very young children, possibly leading to the development of attention disorders at a later age. According to Christakis et al. (2004), “the question remains how television influences the developing mind. Our hypothesis is that it’s the rapidity of image-change that’s potentially damaging to children’s brains. They are experiencing events unfolding in a surreal fashion—this is not how life unfolds” (p. 708).
Many studies show the relationship between media consumption and its influence on the shaping of attitudes, opinions, and behaviors (AAP, 1999; Anderson et al., 2004; Brown, 2001; Campbell, 2000; Cortés, 2000; Harris, 1994; Healy, 1998; Kilbourne, 1999; Luke, 1997; Steyer, 2002; Strasburger & Wilson, 2002). Over 3,000 studies confirm a link between aggressive behaviors and media diet (Steyer, 2002). In addition, a 2004 study released by the American Psychological Society indicated that there is “unequivocal evidence that media violence increases the likelihood of aggressive and violent behavior” (p. 81) in children and youth. The authors claimed that,

In the short term, media violence can increase aggression by priming aggressive thoughts and decision processes, increasing physiological arousal, and triggering a tendency to imitate observed behaviors. And, in the long term, repeated exposure can produce lasting increases in aggressive thought patterns and aggression-supporting beliefs about social behavior, and can reduce individuals’ normal negative emotional responses to violence. (Anderson et al., 2004, p. 81)

Apparently, over 91% of children say they are scared by media violence and can develop a perception recognized as the “mean world” syndrome (Schlegel, 1993). Initially noted by George Gerbner (as quoted in Steyer, 2002), “Mean world syndrome is when media violence can create an almost paralyzing sense of fear that the world is a violent place where aggression is normal. Gerbner associated this syndrome with frequent television viewing” (p. 72). Researchers also claim that there are four primary results of a child’s extensive exposure to violence: increased fear, increased violence, using violence as a tool for conflict resolution and desensitization to the plight of other people (Schlegel, 1993; Steyer, 2002; Strasburger & Wilson, 2001).

Another area of concern is media’s role in promoting early and irresponsible sexual activity among teens. Although teen sex is recognized as a “major health problem” by the American Academy of Pediatrics (1999), Brown (2000) found that
“relatively little is known about how the sexual content adolescents attend to in the media is interpreted or incorporated into their lives” (p. 35). However, many health professionals believe that mass media content depicting casual sex with no consequences has resulted in a number of irresponsible sexual behaviors among teens (Strasburger & Wilson, 2001). Care providers in the health, education and criminal justice professions believe that media literacy skills can assist youth in making more informed and thoughtful decisions about their choices (AAP, 2004; Anderson et al., 2004; Behson, 2002; Potter, 1998).

**What Is Media Literacy?**

The growth of media industries, commercial culture, and new technologies are unparalleled developments in human history. The concept of media literacy, or developing a critical perspective regarding media, has evolved in response to this substantial increase in information sources. Media literacy is generally defined as “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and produce communication in a variety of forms” (Strasburger & Wilson, 2002, p. 323). Aufderheide (2001) provided a more cohesive overview as presented in the 1992 Aspen Institute’s Report of the National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy:

> A media literate person—and everyone should have the opportunity to become one—can decode, evaluate, analyze and produce both print and electronic media. The fundamental objective of media literacy is critical autonomy in relationship to all media. Emphases in media literacy training range widely, including informed citizenship, aesthetic appreciation and expression, social advocacy, self-esteem and consumer confidence. (p. 79)

What it means to be media literate is still open to a great deal of interpretation. Christ and Potter (1998) found that media literacy has surfaced in at least five areas of social relevance. The concept has appeared as a public policy issue; a critical cultural
concern; a set of pedagogical tools for elementary school teachers; suggestions for parents; or a topic of scholarly inquiry from a physiological, cognitive, or anthropological tradition.

The primary purpose of being media literate—to cultivate the questioning of symbolic cultural texts, no matter which media form they assume—is agreed upon by a majority of proponents. Most agree that media literacy involves the development of critical thinking skills regarding one’s media consumption (AAP, 1999; Campbell, 2000; Christ & Potter, 1998; Considine, 2001; Masterman, 1998; Silverblatt, 1995).

Most conceptualizations of media literacy include the following elements:

- Media are constructed and construct reality.
- Media use identifiable techniques.
- Media are businesses with commercial interests.
- Media present ideologies and value messages.
- Form and content are related in each medium, with specific aesthetics, codes, and conventions.
- Receivers negotiate meaning in media. (Buckingham, 2003; Campbell, 2000; Center for Media & Values, 1992; Christ & Potter, 1998; Considine, 2001; Hobbs, 1998).

The methodology in media literacy programs is usually to incorporate what people already know, to recognize their relationships with media systems as valid, and to promote the idea that media education is a central entitlement for all citizens, especially children (Potter, 1998). According to von Feilitzen (1999), “basically, the issues of media education and children’s participation are related to children’s rights not only regarding the media but also in society—rights that are fundamental to increased democracy” (p. 15).

Buckingham and Sefton-Green (2001) provided additional information, noting that the key concepts of media education include media agencies, such as who produces a text and why it is produced; media categories, such as genres and forms; media
technologies and their impact on form; media languages, such as narrative structures; media audiences and how they are identified; and media representation of actual people and events.

**Benefits of Being Media Literate**

Primary reasons for media literacy training are gaining skills in information management, understanding the possible effects of media use and increasing the potential for democratic discourse. Media literacy skills should help audiences question the social, political and economic implications of mass media in society (Cortés, 2000; Potter, 1998; Silverblatt, 1995).

First, since people now consume enormous amounts of information on a daily basis, they need analytic tools to deal with this “diet” of data. As noted by Hammer (1995), “media produces and reproduces social relations. An understanding of . . . media literacy assists students to decode their own environment” (p. 34). With the advent of new technologies, vertical integration of international media systems, convergence, cross-cultural communication, and the increase in media outlets, there are strong arguments to support the development of an information management skill (Campbell, 2000; Cortés, 2000; Kellner, 1998b; Potter, 1998; Silverblatt, 1995).

Second, becoming knowledgeable about the possible uses, abuses, benefits, and problems of media may help consumers identify the potential impact of media messages. According to Potter (1998), “People operating at high levels of media literacy are mindful during exposure. They are skeptical of the interpretations they see and actively process those messages. This process frequently ends with them constructing their own meanings” (p. 7).
Both media educators and media systems recognize adolescents as susceptible audiences (Masterman, 2001). Most media literacy programs focus on teaching children because access to information is at the core of their lives. As noted by Walsh (2000), “children today are raised and educated in a different way from that of any previous generation. Mass media and interactive media have become powerful shapers of children’s minds, experiences and lives” (p. 69). Walsh, a physician, suggested focusing on media education as a way to impact the influence of media on children. The concern was that young people today will not develop independent decision-making skills unless they gain autonomy from media influence (Strasburger & Wilson, 2002).

Experientially, audience participation in media production can help them alter their ideas about what is socially acceptable within the media text and what is not acceptable. Critical analysis and interpretation help citizens make informed and less emotional decisions about mediated information. Empowering consumers with information management skills can bring about constructive change and increase the positive aspects of media use (Cortés, 2000; Hobbs, 2001; Kellner, 1998b; Potter, 1998; Silverblatt, 1995). As Kilbourne (1999) noted, “in recent years, there has been increasing understanding of the relationship of media literacy to substance abuse, violence and other societal problems. Huge and powerful addiction industries (alcohol, tobacco, diet and junk food) depend on a media illiterate population” (p. 304).

**Origins and Evolution of Media Literacy**

The concept of media literacy first appeared in England in the 1930s as a form of protecting consumers against media messages. Past generations of media educators tended to focus on a type of protectionism, trying to defend students against what were perceived as the negative cultural, moral, or ideological influences of the media. This
idea of protectionism has been criticized for failing to recognize the complex relationship people have with media systems (Buckingham, 1998; Cortez, 2000; Potter, 1998).

The first systematic approach to interpreting media messages was presented in 1933 by Leavis and Thompson in *Culture and Environment: The Training of Critical Awareness* (Buckingham, 1998). Basically, the authors proposed an inoculation, or protectionist approach, that trained students about “discrimination” and “critical awareness” of media manipulation. The Frankfurt School, a group of American-based European researchers who fled the Nazis in the 1930s, criticized this focus on effects. The Frankfurt School believed that the rituals of mass communication called for a more interpretive, or cultural study. The concept of being literate about media continued to evolve, and, during the 1960s, the focus on cultural studies became prevalent. In this approach, the idea of culture was presented as a way of life, where cultural expression took a variety of forms. This critical approach to communication analysis regards the media as a reflection of multiple realities (Silverblatt, 1995).

In the 1970s, the ideas of screen theory and demystification were presented. Screen theory, which presented new developments in semiotics and psychoanalytic theory, has been widely debated. Screen theory’s premise was to enable students “to discriminate not against the media but within them—that is, to tell the difference between the good and the bad film, the authentic and shoddy program . . . and recognize work that was merely commercial and exploitative” (Masterman, 1998, p. viii). Both screen and demystification processes questioned the language, ideology, and representation in media systems. Students were urged to put aside their “subjective responses and to engage in systematic forms of analysis that would expose the hidden ideologies of media texts, and thereby liberate themselves from their influence” (Buckingham, 1998, p. 35).
In the United States, the United States Office of Education funded four projects in the 1970s for elementary and secondary teachers to teach media literacy skills, specifically relating to television violence. The four projects were successful in reaching their goals, but all government funding was withdrawn in the 1980s because of the recession (Yates, 2004). Hobbs (1998) claimed that efforts to teach media literacy skills in the 1970s were largely unsuccessful because the programs were not designed with sensitivity to existing cultural standards in local schools, school boards and the general context of U.S. public schools (p. 24).

In the 1990s until the early 21st Century, the media literacy movement grew rapidly in the United States, primarily through grassroots efforts. As noted by Wehmeyer (2000), this cross-ideology discourse grew out of citizen concerns with how the media is saturating the cultural environment. A number of advocacy groups were created, such as the Alliance for a Media Literate America (ALMA) and the Center for Media Education (CME), to educate the public about the need for media education. In addition, the National Communication Association developed voluntary K-12 media education standards for use across the curriculum (Yates, 2004).

The concept of media literacy has had an impact on the dynamics of the traditional classroom. In 1999, Kubey and Baker found that at least 48 state curricular frameworks now contain one or more elements calling for some form of media education. Overall, we concluded that Texas presents the most developed and comprehensive media education framework. Florida’s and North Carolina’s are also impressive. However, guidelines and mandates do not always translate into implementation, quality, or systematic evaluation. (p. 3)

Kubey and Baker’s (1999) research indicated that media literacy components appeared most frequently in language arts and communication arts curriculum. One example of this is in the Florida Sunshine State Standards (2004) for curriculum
development. In the Florida K-2 Language Arts standards, "the student understands the power of language: that word choice can shape ideas, feelings and actions; and knows the various types of mass media (including billboards, newspapers, radio, and television)" (p. 3).

Kubey (2003) pointed to additional curriculum areas where media education training has surfaced, such as health and consumer education, English, social studies, history and civics. The interdisciplinary nature of media studies allows the concept to be implemented in a number of ways using a variety of tools (Considine, 2001).

Additional current trends include the involvement of large media companies in developing media literacy programs. The AOL Time Warner Foundation, formed in 2001, is charged with developing programs in the public interest, with a focus on four priority areas: equipping kids for the 21st Century, extending Internet benefits to all, engaging communities in the arts, and empowering citizens and civic participation. The mission of the foundation is to use the power of the media, communications, and information technology to serve the public interest and strengthen society (AOL Time Warner and Bertelsmann Foundations, 2002). As a relatively new entity, the foundation is attempting to incorporate 21st Century literacy initiatives into existing social partnerships and educational programs. These community outreach programs include PowerUP, the Digital Divide Network, Time Warner media centers and many others addressing technology and literacy issues (B. Keith Fulton, Vice President, AOL Time Warner Foundation, personal correspondence, 2002).

The company is branding the concept as 21st Century Literacy and is in the process of developing a myriad of programs through the AOL Time Warner Foundation and specific subsidiaries, with a focus on children as the primary audience. Initial AOL
Time Warner efforts included cohosting the March 2002 21st Century Literacy Summit in Berlin, Germany, with the Bertelsmann Foundation, and development of multi-layered programs within the AOL Time Warner corporate family. In addition to the Foundation efforts noted above, programs to promote media education have surfaced through several subsidiary outlets: Cable in the Classroom, CNN Student Bureau, Time Inc. in the Classroom, and Court TV. The level of involvement appears to be directly related to the orientation of the medium (AOL Time Warner and Bertelsmann Foundations, 2002).

The idea of media, or 21st Century literacy, has been defined by AOL Time Warner and Bertelsmann Foundations as incorporating the following elements:

• Technology literacy (the ability to use new media).

• Information literacy (the ability to gather, contextualize and evaluate media, and form opinions regarding its merit).

• Media creativity (learning to produce and distribute media).

• Social competence and responsibility (recognizing the shift of power from institutions to individuals). (AOL Time Warner and Bertelsmann Foundations, 2002).

**Communication Theories and Media Literacy**

Wehmeyer (2000) pointed to the need for an alignment between the work of the populist media literacy movement and the work of academics involved in critical media studies. He noted how many of the movement’s Central theoretical concerns echo and provide a contemporary forum for the psychologically and biologically informed threads of mass communication theory and research that dominated the U.S. academic understanding of media, society and culture in the mid-twentieth century. (p. 94)

Interestingly, Piette and Giroux (2001) concluded in their study that if media education was going to establish itself as a well-grounded pedagogical field, it would have to “render explicit its theoretical foundations” (p. 89), and that media education was
heavily dependent upon established media theory. The authors noted the vast differences in current theoretical approaches to mass communication, and singled out “two approaches which are most fruitful; one, the way in which media theories appraise the influence of the media, and two, the way in which the theories assess the nature of the audience” (p. 97). They claimed that media education is acquiring the status of a new field that stands between the spheres of education and communication, with links to the broader field of mass communication. However, it was also noted that relatively few studies focus on the theoretical foundations of media education.

Communication theories that have relevance to the concept of a media literacy citizenry include agenda setting, social learning, cultivation, and uses and gratifications. Each one of these theories focuses on how individuals are affected by media use, noting varying degrees of how audiences construct social meanings through use of media.

The basic premise of agenda setting is that media tells us what’s important. In agenda setting, media don’t necessarily tell us what to think about a topic, only that it should have priority depending on the amount and type of coverage it gets. Social learning, or modeling, is relevant because we learn behaviors from observing others and imitating them. Media models can become a source of observational and/or incidental learning. The cultivation approach looks at the way exposure to media can shape our view of the world, specifically through viewing television. Uses and gratifications theorists place more emphasis on the active role of the audience making choices and being goal directed in media use. This theory holds that the experience and effects of media depend in part on how one uses media and what gratifications are gained from such use (Baran & Davis, 1995; Campbell, 2000; Cortés, 2001; Harris, 1994).
In addition, the philosophies and communication perspectives of symbolic interactionism and semiotics are integral to the understanding and implementation of media literacy in today’s symbolic environment. Several researchers point to how consumers are active communicators, creating meaning through their interactions with the cultural environment. According to Hammer (1995), “the essence of communication is . . . that communication is a semiotic and not a linguistic concept: it refers to the transmission of signals, signs, signifiers, and symbols in any communications system whatsoever” (p. 46). And Semali (2003) noted that “consciously engaging in a systematic inquiry where we identify the symbols and understand their meanings and functions” (p. 274) will assist citizens in developing critical thinking skills in today’s mediated world.

**Youth as active audiences.** It is becoming evident that it is unrealistic to “protect” children from today’s mediated environment. Children are avid consumers and makers of media—this is their culture. This idea of audiences as active makers of meaning instead of passive recipients of information is central to the concept of being media literate (Masterman, 1985).

Today’s youth are relatively media-savvy and enjoy the authorship opportunities that emerging provided by interactive media systems. The new technology offers opportunities for exchange of ideas, access to information, convenience of use, and freedom of expression. Young people actively use media to define themselves, and media can help them make sense of their lives as a form of self-socialization (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 2001; Huntemann & Morgan, 2001; Kawamoto, 1997; Kellner, 1998b).

Arnett (1995) claimed that identity formation was one of the five dominant uses of media by adolescents, noting that “adolescents take ideals of what it means to be a
man or woman partly from the media, which present gender ideals in images through music, movies, television and magazines” (p. 522). The other uses he identified are entertainment, high sensation, coping, and youth culture identification. More specifically, entertainment was recognized as a typical way to use media, where it provided enjoyment and escapism; certain media, such as action films, provide intense, high stimulation designed to appeal specifically to adolescents; adolescents cope with or relieve negative emotions, specifically through using music; and media consumption may give this population a sense of being connected to a larger peer group (Arnett, 1995).

Media Literacy and Curriculum Development

Shifting educational paradigm

One area where there is consensus among media educators is recognizing the need for educational reform. The concept of student-centered, or inquiry-based learning, is at the heart of this reform idea. A growing body of evidence points to the importance of developing within children and adolescents a critical awareness of the social, political, and economic messages emanating from popular culture forms of expression. The reform movement also calls for a redefinition of texts to include the various signs and symbols used to communicate messages in today’s society. (Alvermann, 2002; Brunner & Tally, 1999; Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 2001; von Feilitzen, 1999; Hammer, 1995).

A major concern is that educational systems still operate under the old “chalk and talk” paradigm, where the teacher is the main decision maker, rarely incorporating media literacy skills (Brunner & Tally, 1999; Considine, 2001; Hobbs, 1998; Semali, 2003). As Considine (2001) noted, “technology, which promises independent activity, discovery learning, and student-centered classrooms, represents an all-out assault on these traditions” (p. 253). There is a sense that media literacy demands a type of teaching that
is democratic, and that the very act of studying media helps democratize the student-teacher relationship.

The call to reform addresses the disconnect between popular culture and education, suggesting implementation of the intermedial skills student develop outside the classroom. The idea is to incorporate media literacy into existing curriculum as a cross-disciplinary concept, developing new understandings of how, why and when to use media as a teaching tool. For example, popular songs can be used as a "hook" in classrooms to illuminate a topic. Through this method, teachers can introduce visual art, poetry, literature, film, and other sources. The interdisciplinary nature of music can interest and engage students and teachers, promoting critical thinking and stimulating further inquiry. As Alvermann (2002) noted, “It is about surviving in an information economy, communicating across generations, creating ‘shape-shifting’ portfolios, reinventing literacy teacher education, and using digital tools to foster critical inquiry” (p. viii).

A useful aspect of media literacy curriculum is how students can learn how to work together—an important skill in life. As Yates (2004) stated,

Besides teaching students how to analyze and critique media message, media education provides the opportunity for them to learn to work together toward a common goal. In the process they learn about responsibility, cooperation and problem solving . . . they will always encounter situations that require these skills. In addition, students identify their strengths and weaknesses, develop varied interests, and accept new challenges. (p. 2)

Despite efforts to include media literacy training in classrooms, Brown (2001) noted that classroom applications often lack interaction and open dialogue, collaborative opportunities, and relating media to issues of political and social power. And, when teachers are not trained to use media as teaching tools, the emphasis on product rather
than process has proven somewhat fruitless (Considine, 2001). Technology’s ability to transform education has been clearly recognized by educators, but there are several obstacles to implementation, which will be addressed later in this paper.

**Redefinition of text**

Teachers and researchers have found that today’s youth are well-versed in using diverse symbol systems that promote their understanding of concepts on a multitude of levels (Buckingham, 2003; Semali, 2002). Today’s texts are recognized as “constructed artifacts that convey shifting meanings, reflect cultural ideologies, and have powerful impacts on our worldviews and behaviors” (Pailliotet, Semali, Rodenberg, Giles, & Macaul, 2000, p. 210). This “mediasphere” provides educators, social service workers, health care providers and others an unprecedented opportunity to develop programs that provide multi-mediated learning strategies for children (Semali, 2002). As von Feilitzen (1999) noted,

> The real challenge today is not to teach—it is to stimulate learning. For in today’s world, to educate is to be able to reach out to young people, and help them explore their way through the media, through the Internet, today’s tools of education. With some exceptions, most children have little formal introduction to the media world in which they are born and raised. (p. 13)

A reconceptualized vision of new literacies education would include an effort to enable students to understand how visual media work to produce meanings. Fisherkeller (2000) pointed to how multiple literacies will involve analysis and production of multiple media according to the evaluation standards set by schools, the demands of the workplace, and the needs of a democratic society. Semali (2003) defined this new form of literacy as “intermediality—where print and visual media meet to create textuality that bridges home, classroom and community contexts” (p. 15).
Alvermann (2002) called for a redefinition of the term literacies to include the “performative, visual, aural, and semiotic understandings necessary for constructing and reconstructing print and nonprint-based texts” (p), while Kellner (1998) noted that “in addition to critical media literacy, print literacy, computer literacy, and multimedia literacy, multiple literacies involve cultural literacy, social literacy, and ecoliteracy” (p. 119).

Mediasphere—it is recognized as the new “electronic social hall,” which includes a diversity of output such as images, audio bites, and video streaming that acknowledges the day-to-day immersion in the sphere where the mediation of our experiences is inescapable. (King & O’Brien, 2002, p. 40)

Obstacles to Implementing Media Literacy

However, there are several obstacles to the development of media education within existing educational frameworks. While there is general consensus about the basic definition and goals of media literacy education, there are differing points of view regarding how to implement those goals (Hobbs, 1998; Potter, 1998; Wehmeyer, 2000). As Feilitzen noted (1999), “the concepts of media education and media participation have been given different interpretations in different parts of the world, in accordance with the cultural and pedagogic traditions of the countries in question” (p. 11).

Policy issues within the United States include the lack of unity among media educators regarding what media literacy should accomplish, the diversity and general climate within the United States educational system, the need for and lack of teacher training, determining where to place media education within the curriculum, a lack of coherent assessment strategies, ascertaining which roles media plays in the cultural environment, and controversies about the involvement of the media industry (Considine, 2001; Hobbs, 1998; Kubey, 2003; Yates, 2004).
Lack of unity among media educators & the educational climate in the United States

Within educational circles, there is a debate over what constitutes media literacy pedagogy, with different agendas and programs. There are two primary approaches identified within the United States, the more traditional protectionist, or “inoculation” approach, and the critical-cultural contextual approach (Kellner, 1998b; Kubey, 2003).

The protectionist approach attempts to inoculate young people against the effects of media, focusing on such issues as aggression and crime, sexuality, drugs and alcohol, the promotion of materialistic values, and other concerns. The protectionist orientation seeks to defend students against what is perceived as the negative moral, cultural, or ideological influences of the media. This approach has been criticized for failing to recognize the complexity of young people’s experiences with the media (Buckingham, 1998; Kellner, 1998; Kubey, 2003).

Lewis and Jhally (1998) outlined a contextual cultural approach to media literacy. The authors propose that audiences already have a high degree of literacy regarding media text, and contend that a textual analysis is necessarily limited if it takes place without examining the institutional, cultural, and economic conditions in which texts are produced and understood. The contextual approach argues that, in order to evaluate messages, people must learn to see them not simply as true or false, realistic or misleading, stereotypical or positive, but as authored voices with certain interests about the world, voices that could be influenced or replaced. This approach extends democracy to the audiences, allowing citizens to see the media within a framework of interests and power relations (Lewis & Jhally, 1998).
Kubey (2003) noted that the protectionist approach resonates more with the orientation towards media and education in the United States. He stated,

Once linked to social problems, and with millions of dollars being spent on research and prevention, university researchers and directors of media literacy programs recognize that inoculation may well stand the better chance of attracting funding . . . there is a market-driven propensity to find ways to adapt media education to our society’s constant state of crisis about the socialization of the young. (p. 363)

The diversity of approaches is recognized as both the greatest strength and weakness of media literacy education (Considine, 1999; Hobbs, 1998; Lewis & Jhally, 1998). In support of this diversity, Considine (1999) recognized that “as an interdisciplinary concept, media literacy can be explored and developed through several different approaches. It is important to recognize that none of these approaches by itself constitutes the totality of media literacy” (p. 38). It is recognized as a weakness because there appears to be a lack of coherence and consensus about the goals of media education. As Lewis and Jhally pointed out, “when your numbers are small, why separate over internal doctrinaire disputes?” (p. 118).

Teacher training

In developing media literacy curriculum, teachers need evaluation criteria to assess their students work in an appropriate fashion. However, few teachers have been provided with opportunity to develop such strategies (Hobbs, 1998; Semali, 2003). They are facing a new world of digital media that involves new skills in understanding texts and visual literacies that involves a cognitive shift in the way we think about representing knowledge (Brunner & Tally, 1999, p. 13).

Reasons that teachers are not taught media education skills include their unwillingness to use media (teachers are intimidated by student knowledge of media systems and therefore shy away from using it), the slow process of change in the
American educational system, the lack of funding for media literacy programs, and the vast gap between traditional classrooms and external culture. This gap leads to a severe disconnect between students and teachers (Alvermann, 2002; Considine, 2001; Luke, 1997). Alvermann pointed to how the generation gap between teachers and today’s mediated adolescents is “complicated by constructions of identity that come with material consequences related to access and authority” (p. x). She noted that there is emerging evidence suggesting that adolescent participation in digital technologies offers them alternative ways to construct identity.

As Kubey (2003) indicated, “there remains insufficient recognition that the primary means of information dissemination in our culture is no longer print. Image and sound have become increasingly important, yet the American educational system refuses to recognize this fact and retool to educate students for this new reality” (p. 359). In addition, Lewis and Jhally (1998) noted how, when teachers are trained in media education at the Five-College Media Literacy Institute in Boston, MA, they return to their schools with little financial, pedagogical, or structural support for integrating the concepts into existing curriculum.

**Determining where to place media literacy within existing curriculum**

Brunner and Tally (1999) discussed how new media can relate to disciplinary goals in language arts, science, social studies, and art. They claim that “technologies can support democratic learning in information-age schools: as tools for student research (supporting inquiry learning strategies), student production (in shaping and expressing meaning), and public conversations (linking students in dialogue with peers and adults beyond the school)” (p. 2).
Buckingham (1998) pointed to how existing curricular boundaries between subjects is becoming obsolete, especially in those areas that are broadly concerned with culture and electronic communication. The interdisciplinary nature of visual literacy suggests it as a possible unifying concept when attempting to incorporate media literacy into curriculum. For example, visual literacy could connect science and history data with examples of how images evoke meanings in the humanities (Brunner & Tally, 1999). As noted by Hammer (1995), “much of today’s teaching doesn’t stress the importance of understanding relationships rather than things. . . . We should be stressing the relationship of one subject to another, and the relationship of subjects to everyday life, especially within media literacy pedagogy” (p. 35).

The National Council of Teachers of English (NTCE, 2002) believes that two of the values of media literacy are the transference of skills and an integrated curriculum. Concerns include where to place it within existing curriculum and how to reach standardized testing goals. There are many resources now available for teachers to address these concerns, including texts such as Get Them Thinking! Use Media Literacy to Prepare Students for State Assessments (Lockwood Summers, 2005), and web sites that offer free media literacy curriculum guides, such as the Just Think Foundation and MindBlue Productions.

**Lack of assessment strategies**

According to Semali (2003), “few studies have explicitly defined and measured the results of participation in media literacy curricula, but there is a generalized notion of what those outcomes are. Media literacy training can help foster critical thinking and discussion of media-related issues” (p. 274). Hobbs (2001) pointed to how portfolio based models of assessment are consistent with the idea of developing multiple literacies
in students, so students can make direct connections between their reading, writing, viewing, and analysis of images, and the process of creating messages using various symbols (p. 178).

Brown (2001) discussed how student skills in media analysis were highest when instruction was integrated across multiple subject areas with explicit connections made with each area; when both analysis and production were employed; when teachers developed their own localized materials, when visual materials were used daily and when instruction in specific genres was included in instruction. He noted how further research is needed regarding teacher practices and student performance.

In discussing why the United States was slow to adopt media literacy as a core curriculum component, Kubey (2003) noted that “to date, there is limited hard, experimental evaluation research demonstrating the efficacy of media education or the transfer of analytic skills to other realms of critical thinking” (p. 366). However, he continued by noting that there was substantial qualitative and anecdotal evidence and research that effectively supported the development of media literacy pedagogy. And Semali (2003) pointed out that, “for many schools, what is missing is a research-based method for teaching students to read, question and understand the visual languages of media” (p. 272).

**Media’s role(s) in the cultural environment**

**The societal curriculum.** As the storytellers of our culture, media educate people, sometimes incidentally. In other words, people develop beliefs and attitudes based on information gained from viewing and hearing all kinds of programs (Cortés, 2001). Critical media literacy takes a comprehensive approach that teaches critical skills and how to use media as instruments of social change. In certain countries,
media education is growing because more people consider it an effective way to change
the social inequalities generated by unequal access to information (Piette & Giroux,
2001; Silverblatt, 1995).

Cortés (2001) identified how media plays an extremely strong role in the societal
curriculum through disseminating information about multicultural diversity. The societal
curriculum is identified as the informal curriculum of families, peer groups,
neighborhoods, and other socializing forces outside the classroom. As Cortés (2001)
stated, “Through the societal curriculum, students learn language, acquire culture, obtain
knowledge, develop beliefs, internalize attitudes, and establish patterns of behavior”
(p. 169). In other words, the media has a pervasive impact on people, educating them
about their world in terms of what and who is important. Through deconstruction of
popular culture, media users can understand more about where, why, how, and when a
storytelling process is taking place. Huntemann and Morgan (2001) noted,

The media provide an extraordinary quantity of examples of different types of
people behaving in different types of ways in different types of situations. Yet
just under the surface of this vast flow of images lie systematic patterns of
inclusion and exclusion, of conventions and stereotypes, reflecting ideology and
social power. All this has significant implications for young people struggling to
forge a sense of identity. (p. 309)

**Cultural capital.** A consistent goal in American education is to create
responsible citizens for a democratic society. In this information age, citizens should be
able to access, analyze, produce, and evaluate information in a variety of print and
nonprint forms (Considine, 2001). Kellner (1998a) argued that, while “technology has
long been of marginal importance to intellectual activity, media literacy and the capacity
to utilize new technologies has now—at the end of the 20th century—become of central
importance” (p. 167).
Some scholars question the ideas that new technology will empower individuals or create a sense of community. Concerns include the inequity of access to technology, the extreme manifestations of free speech, and the self-selected cybertribes who can contribute to real-life segregation, social fragmentation, and intergroup violence (Cortez, 2000; Best & Kellner, 2003). As noted by Masterman (1998), “questions of power are central to discussions about the production, circulation and consumption of images and representations (p. x).”

Probably the most pressing problem regarding the development of a media literate population is the gap between those who have access to technology and those who do not. For example, The United States Department of Commerce 2000 study, *Falling Through the Net: Toward Digital Inclusion*, reported that certain groups—such as white, Asian Americans, and Pacific Islanders—and those with higher income and education levels, had higher than average levels of computer ownership and Internet access. Cortés (2000) noted that many call cyberspace the World White Web.

The absence of people like themselves in media representations can have significant impact on how young people perceive the social importance of their ethnic and racial groups. Huntemann and Morgan (2001) stated that,

The media play a significant role in repeating, normalizing, and perpetuating many negative images of specific groups, and this can have crucial implications for how minority children view themselves. One of the most powerful mechanisms of keeping power away from a group is to render its members invisible…Numerous content analyses of media programming indicate not only that ethnic minorities are greatly underrepresented but also that, when they are present, they are negatively portrayed. (p. 316)

**Controversies about the involvement of the media industry**

An increasing number of media firms have been getting involved with media education initiatives across the country. There are a variety of examples, but probably the most controversial to date is the contract between a number of U.S. school districts and
Channel One broadcasting. School districts contract to broadcast Channel One’s 14-minute show (comprised of 12 minutes of news and 2 minutes of advertising) into high school classrooms. In return, districts gain a substantial amount of free technology, including satellite dishes, wiring, VCRs, and television monitors for each classroom. This issue galvanized media educators into an ongoing debate about how corporate involvement creates a commercialized classroom and fuels a conflict of interest regarding the goals of media education (Hobbs, 1998; Jehlen, 2001; Yates, 2004).

Hobbs (1998) pointed out the two sides of the debate. One side was that media organizations had a social responsibility to help people develop critical thinking about media as a consumer skills, and the other was that the media industry was cleverly taking advantage of underfunded educators who were desperate for materials. The concern was that media companies would coopt media literacy standards, making sure that public criticism about media never got too strident (Yates, 2004).

Another important example of this debate was the participation of AOL Time Warner in two media literacy conferences, the Summit 2000 in Toronto, Canada (as AOL), and the 2001 American Media Literacy Alliance (AMLA) kick-off event in Austin, Texas. At the Austin event, AOL Time Warner was represented by the CNN Student Bureau subsidiary. The involvement of such a large corporation was quite controversial, as many participants felt that the issue was compromised by corporate interference. However, as Faith Rogow, ALMA President stated,

In terms of corporate self-interest, some tech companies share ALMA’s vision that literacy for the 21st Century requires more than learning how to read and write print. That vision includes computers, which is attractive to corporations like AOL Time Warner. Despite claims that media corporations are trying to co-opt media education, I’ve seen no evidence of that. (personal correspondence, 2002)
Additional AOL Time Warner efforts include cohosting the March 2002 21st Century Literacy Summit in Berlin, Germany with the Bertelsmann Foundation. The Summit was an opportunity for leaders in education, government, and business to develop an international platform supporting the evolution of literacy skills. Recommendations for increased literacy surface in the areas of education, the workplace, and civic engagement. An AOL Time Warner press release (2002), stated “digital literacy is a basic skill . . . because the ability to evaluate, organize and productively use information across a broad range of new media is becoming increasingly significant in education, the workplace, and civic participation.” The Summit addressed the need for individuals and institutions to develop 21st century literacy skills that gave them information management skills, while also incorporating a sense of community responsibility.

Another interesting aspect of this debate is whether it is appropriate to direct students to reactive or proactive stances against major media industries. The question is whether social activism may diffuse the essential purpose of becoming knowledgeable, discerning, and selective media users (Brown, 2001).

Future issues for media literacy education include a need for coherent programs; funding that does not compromise the goals of media education; support from local school boards, teachers, and civic leaders; teacher training; and the development of high quality teaching materials. Additional concerns for media educators include the questions of ideology and cultural value. Yates (2004) called for media educators to “frame the debate about societal literacy to encompass all forms of communication . . . stressing the goals of democratic citizenship as central to U.S. education and forming coalitions between technologists, protectionists, artists and media professionals” (p. 10).
Symbolic Interaction

Symbolic Interactionist Perspective

Symbolic interactionism is a theoretical orientation that began in the early 20th Century, strongly influenced by George H. Mead and other theorists in the pragmatist school of thought. Proponents of the pragmatist approach to philosophy argue that the truth of an idea or the meaning of a statement is dependent on its practical consequences. They claim an idea is true if it works. In the pragmatist view, the reality of the world is not out there waiting to be discovered, but is actively created by us (Charon, 2001; Gingrich, 2003; Hewitt, 2003).

As a social science perspective, symbolic interactionism focuses on the behavior of human beings and their internal and external interactions. According to Blumer (1969), “symbolic interactionism is a down-to-earth approach to the scientific study of human group life and human conduct. Its empirical world is the natural world of such group life and conduct” (p. 47). Researchers using this perspective examine and analyze the interaction of daily experiences, rather than the social structure systems associated with communities (i.e., laws or other established guidelines). Generally speaking, “the symbolic interaction perspective does not analyze the social world in a quantitative manner, but is qualitative and interpretive, and attempts to provide rich or thick descriptive analysis” (Gingrich, 2003, p. 3).

Social science disciplines that use a symbolic interactionist perspective in research include social psychology, communications, sociology, and anthropology. Symbolic interactionism is recognized as one of the first social science theories to discuss how we learn and use culture to learn from each other. Simply put, symbolic interactionism (SI) “is the study of how the self and the social environment shape each
other through communication” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 41). Researchers who developed and continued with this perspective include Blumer, Becker, Goffman, Denzin, and Hochschild (Charon, 2001; Gingrich, 2003).

**Characteristics of Symbolic Interaction**

In understanding humanity, symbolic interactionism focuses on interaction rather than personality, including interaction with society and with oneself. It emphasizes that people are active and dynamic, defining their environment rather than just responding to it. Some of the characteristics of the symbolic interaction perspective are an emphasis on interactions among people, use of symbols in communication and interaction, interpretation as part of action, and self as constructed by individuals and others in flexible, adjustable social processes (Charon, 2001; Gingrich, 2003). According to Charon (2001),

In symbolic interactionism, the relationship with the environment is central. We do not just respond to our environment, but we define, act toward it, and use it. We are not simply shaped, conditioned, controlled by that environment (including other humans), but we act toward it according to our ongoing definitions arising from perspectives that are themselves dynamic. (p. 40)

In symbolic interactionism, meanings are recognized as social products, but there is also a process of interpretation (or self-interaction) that has profound implications on how the meanings develop. In other words, the sender’s message will be interpreted by the receiver with input from both external and internal social elements. According to Blumer (1969), there are three premises specific to the theory of symbolic interactionism: that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meaning those things have to them; the meaning of such things is derived from human social interaction; and these meanings are modified through an individualized interpretive process.
Charon (2001) further explained this process, noting that interaction is an ongoing activity, thinking is an integral part of both internal and external interaction, and that how we define a situation in the present dictates our reactions. In other words, as active participants, we are constantly evolving and redefining our environments.

**Influences on the Symbolic Interaction Perspective**

**The pragmatists.** As already noted, the original symbolic interactionist concept is rooted in the philosophy of pragmatism, a school of thought developed by John Dewey, William James, Charles S. Pierce, and George Herbert Mead. Pragmatism is important to symbolic interactionism because of its approach to how humans relate to their environment.

Pragmatism teaches that humans always intervene in determining what is real, that knowledge is believed and remembered because it is useful, that objects are defined according to their use, and that humans must be understood primarily by how they handle their situations (Charon, 2001). Mead furthered this orientation by recognizing that the human species, society and the individual are constantly undergoing change. He also emphasized our ability to be uniquely active symbol-users, engaging our mind in various interactions (Baran & Davis, 1995; Charon, 2001; Mead, 1934).

According to Lindlof and Taylor (1995), pragmatism can be summarized in a few primary propositions, providing a situational context for the development of symbolic interactionism. The propositions are as follows:

- Meaning is invoked through practical interactions.
- Different meanings grow out of different procedures for anticipating and orienting to the social world.
- Semiotics (the theory of signs) provides a basis for the study of signification (meaning-making) as a social process.
• Reality is indeterminate: the world we perceive and act in consists of multiple, emergent realities that are always in the process of changing. These realities are formed in interactions conducted between the self and other people, objects and events.

• Belief in the mutual constitution of self and society. (p. 41)

George H. Mead. In 1934, George H. Mead proposed that we learn our social roles through interaction with each other to create and sustain a productive social unit. In addition, he noted that that the use of symbols transformed the socialization process because symbols structure our ability to perceive and interpret what goes on around us. Mead believed that without an understanding of mind, symbols, and self, human behavior cannot be understood for what it actually is (Charon, 2001).

Mead argued that mind, self, and society are internalized as a complex set of symbols. In other words, the meanings we give to signs and symbols define us and the realities that we experience. Mead (1934) stated, “Meaning is implicit—if not always explicit—in the relationship among various phases of the social act to which it refers, and out of which it develops. And its development takes place in terms of symbolization at the human evolutionary level” (p. 76).

Mead suggested that a sensible way to understand how people socially interact is to look at how they learn to play team sports. Mead argued that a sophisticated form of mutual conditioning is what occurs on the playing field, where each player learns a social role. Each role is learned by observing and modeling good players and by interacting with other team members. There is satisfaction in being accepted by others as a productive member of a social unit. Mead used this example to reflect society, where we all learn social roles through interaction with others in order to sustain productive social
units. We internalize the situational rules and behave in socially acceptable ways (Baran & David, 1995; Mead, 1934).

It would be remiss not to include a discussion of Mead’s concepts of *conversation of gestures* and *significant symbols* when reviewing symbolic interactionism. Mead argued that the basis for human interaction differs substantially from other animals. Among other animals, the interaction takes a form that Mead called the *conversation of gestures*. In this process, each individual, when beginning an act, engages in actions that stimulate a response. For example, a cat starting a catfight bares its teeth and assumes an aggressive stance. Its physical gestures are stimuli that provoke an aggressive response from the other cat. Interaction between the two animals proceeds, with each cat essentially controlling the other cat’s behavior (Hewitt, 2003; Mead, 1934).

For humans, the most important communication tools are linguistic. People pay attention to both body language and vocal gestures, and language provides a symbolic bridge for understanding a situation. As Mead stated, they are *significant symbols*. A statement can arouse almost the same reactions in the speaker and other people that hear the words. For example, shouting the word “FIRE!” in a public place will evoke a flight response in those that hear it. It creates a common attitude in the crowd and the one who shouts it.

The word creates a readiness to act in a particular way, an image of the conduct appropriate to the situation, a plan of action. It is this creation of a common attitude in both symbol user and symbol hearer that makes possible the individual’s control of his or her conduct. (Hewitt, 2003, p. 9)

In Mead’s theory, the significant symbol not only gives humans control over their own conduct, but also gives them a consciousness of self. As Hewitt (2003) noted, “our capacity to use symbols in imagining how others respond to our acts also gives us the
capacity to be conscious of ourselves” (p. 9). The significant symbol is the basis for shared meanings in human life. A primary example of how humans use the capacity for creating significant symbols is how we name things. According to Hewitt (2003), “words represent the objects humans can imagine. People cannot act toward that which they cannot name” (p. 29). Naming creates a shared view of reality by causing the namer and other people to take a common attitude towards things.

**Basic Concepts of Symbolic Interactionism**

**Symbols.** The most important concept in symbolic interactionism is the symbol, or in Mead’s term, the significant symbol. Using symbols is perhaps the most important development in human evolution. Because humans can use significant symbols, they interact with each other on the basis of meanings. Their responses depend on the interpretation of symbols rather than just acting as a conditioned response. In other words, they engage in symbolic interaction (Hewitt, 2003, Charon, 2001).

According to Hewitt (2003), there are three key facts regarding the impact of symbols:

1. Symbols transform the environment because they make it possible to name things and create things by creating names. For example, abstract and imaginary objects with no tangible existence (such as love, respect, responsibility) are created by naming them.

2. Symbols make it possible to reproduce behaviors or attitudes in other people, because their meaning is shared by a community. For example, if one diner at the dinner table says “I smell something burning!” he will arouse a shared set of meanings in the listeners that will evoke specific attitudes and behaviors. They will all (speaker and listeners) feel the need to deal with the burning object.

3. Symbols make it possible for an individual to act toward an environment of which she is a part. In other words, the individual takes on a new relationship to herself by participating in a community of symbol users where she is symbolically noted, or named. For example, becoming a Ph.D. student gives one a new self-identity, or symbolic notation.
**Objects.** Human beings exist in a world of social objects. According to Charon, (2001), people understand and use their environment; they understand that environment through interactions with self and others; and the environment is always changing as their goals change (p. 58). Because their conduct depends on symbols, people act toward objects they designate and do not merely respond to stimuli (Hewitt, 2003). In Herbert Blumer’s (1969) words, from the standpoint of people acting at a given moment, “the environment consists only of the objects that the given human beings recognize and know” (p. 11). For example, as one reads a newspaper, the environment consists of what the person is recognizing and interacting with in that paper, unless attention is directed elsewhere.

**Acts and social acts**

An act is given a name and significance. According to Hewitt (2003), an act is defined as “a functional unit of conduct with an identifiable beginning and end that is related to the organism’s purposes and that is oriented toward one or more objects” (p. 50). However, it is not always easy to determine when a given act begins or ends, especially because it appears that acts are contained within acts. It is probably more accurate to think of people as constantly and naturally active in some way. Actions result from our definition of a situation, and are directed toward the goals and objects considered to be important (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934).

Social objects are created as people engage in social acts. Mead (1934) noted that a social act is one that involves “the cooperation of more than one individual, and whose object as defined by the act . . . is a social object” (p. 7) Social acts depend on social interaction and interpretation; people must orient their conduct toward each other in order
to cooperate. For example, the social object of an act can be a baseball game, conversation or other interaction. (Charon, 2001; Hewitt, 2003).

**Self and the control of behavior**

**Self as object.** Central to the symbolic interactionist perspective is the idea that humans can be objects to themselves, that the self is an internal environment toward which we act (Charon, 2003). In other words, each person can be an object that he or she can name, imagine, visualize, talk about, act toward, and respond to in other manners. By naming group members and themselves, people develop the social process within their own mind. And, “when humans mind themselves, they constitute the self as an object. Each time we imagine ourselves doing something—whether saying “no” to a date, achieving a job promotion—we are acting toward ourselves as objects” (Hewitt, 2003, p. 57). An important point to grasp is that one is dealing in abstractions when talking about the self as object—not just the tangible physical body known as “self” (Baran & Davis, 1995; Blumer, 1969; Gingrich, 2003). According to Charon (2001), social interactionists believe that we learn about objects that exist in reality from interacting with other people. When we use these objects, they become social objects to us.

**Self as process.** Mead’s (1934) distinction between I and Me when discussing the self further explains how we objectify ourselves. Each human being has an I and a Me. According to Charon (2001), “all action arises from the conversation between the I and the Me, the I being the actor as subject and the Me being as actor as object” (p. 93). The “I as subject” refers to how people impulsively respond to situations; while the “Me as object” refers to how people imagine themselves as objects in the situation (Hewitt, 2003). For example, think about a mother disciplining her child. The child misbehaves and is sent to her room (I acting impulsively). She begins to protest, then imagines her
mother’s probable response and keeps quiet to avoid further punishment. The child has thought of her mother’s imagined attitude toward her possible response to the situation. She may think, “She’ll only be angrier with me if I fight with her!” According to Hewitt (2003), this behavior is “called the ‘object’ phase of the self because the individual takes herself into account as an object” (p. 59). The child becomes a Me when taking her mother’s point of view.

The I and Me continually alternate in ongoing conduct. It is through this alternation of I (impulse) and Me (reflection) that human beings gain control over their conduct (Blumer, 1969; Charon, 2001; Hewitt, 2003; Mead, 1934). According to Hewitt (2003), “this is the essence of self as process. There is an impulse to act, imagined responses to the act, imagined alternative actions, and a resolution of the internal dialogue to some course of action” (p. 60).

Situations and roles

Human behavior is always situated, and people are constantly defining the situations they face. Hewitt (2003) defined a situation as “an organization of perception in which people assemble objects, meanings, and other people, and act toward them in a coherent, organized way” (p. 62). In most situations people already understand how to act and how other people will act. They share common and preestablished meanings of what is expected in the actions of the participants, and each participant guides her behavior by these meanings (Blumer, 1969, p.17). When a situation is familiar and its meaning is known, people organize their conduct and expectations in relation to its definition. For example, the members of a sports team and their audience will interact within a familiar definition of the situation (a game is being played and specific roles are assigned).
Hewitt (2003) and Charon (2001) identified two concepts as key to understanding how conduct is formed in social interaction: role making, where a person constructs behavior to fit a situation’s definition; and role taking, where a person imaginatively takes the role of another and looks at the situation from that vantage point. The importance of role taking is stressed, as Charon (2001) stated, “role taking is an integral part of all interaction, necessary for understanding the other and being understood by the other” (p. 114). As active participants in the social process, people respond to situations and determine their role(s) by doing so (Blumer, 1969).

**Symbolic Interaction and Media Studies**

It appears that symbolic interactionism is a practical orientation for studying communication systems. It resonates with tenets in communication, such as “the role of symbolic expression in affiliation and conflict, the relationships among actors’ understandings, motives and message design practices, and the scrutiny of meanings inherent in social phenomena” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 43). However, Baran and Davis (1995) noted that media theorists were slow to see the relevancy of symbolic interactionism because of its focus on interpersonal interaction and relative disregard for media systems.

Blumer (1969) pointed to how symbolic interactionism is an excellent choice for studying media systems because of the changing character of media presentations, the active character of audiences, the process of interpretation that intervenes between presentations and audiences, and the incorporation of media, presentations, and people in an ever-evolving world. He stated that a research approach

Calls for handling the media-influence not in isolation but in relation to other sources of communication which challenge, oppose, merge with, or reinforce its
play . . . catching the way in which people are defining to one another the content of the given media-influence under study. (p. 194).

People develop conduct and perceptions as they interact with their environment. Social acts persist because, through individual and collective communication, people use their understandings of the acts as templates to reproduce them. An understanding of today’s world is often created through an interaction with media symbols, rather than a direct interaction with other people (Baran & Davis, 1995). As Lindlof and Taylor (2002) stated, “the rich possibilities of symbolic interaction for studying communication have clearly not been exhausted” (p. 44).

**Semiotics**

**History of Semiotics**

Semiotics, or semiology, the theory of signs, has roots in antiquity. The word “semiotics” comes from the Greek root, seme, as in semeiotikos, an interpreter of signs. Both Plato and Aristotle wrote about the nature of verbal and visual signs in human communication. The Stoics and Epicureans debated the differences between natural signs (freely occurring in nature) and conventional signs (designed specifically for communicating). St. Augustine is recognized by some semiotic historians as “the greatest semiotician of ancient times and the real founder of semiotics” (Noth, 1990, p. 16). He narrowed the focus of sign study by lecturing about how words seemed to be the correlates of mental words (Cobley & Jansz, 1999; Noth, 1990).

The ancient theoretical traditions of semiotics can be found in medicine, philosophy and linguistics. Medieval semiotics developed within theology, under the areas of grammar, logic, and rhetoric. However, a general theory of signs under the name semiotics did not arise before the period of modern semiotics (Chandler, 2002; Noth, 1990).
The tradition of semiotics in the 20th Century was primarily developed by two theorists, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and Charles Sanders Pierce (1839-1914). The concept was further developed by additional theorists, including Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco, who both wrote extensively about how humans use signs as a form of visual and semantic language. The most basic premise of semiotics is that signs mediate all that human beings can know. This concept is inherent in the work of the above-noted theorists (Barthes, 1964; Eco, 1976; Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993; Semali, 2002).

**What Does Semiotic Inquiry Entail?**

The semiotician is an observer of how people communicate, looking for information that reveals something pertinent about human activity—constantly asking what does this or that mean? (Danesi, 1999). The general theory of semiotics provides us with a deeper understanding of human communication with signs, symbols, and images (Semali, 2002).

For semioticians, a text can exist within a medium, and may be verbal, nonverbal or both. A text refers to the ways in which individuals develop their message(s) (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993). Chandler (2002) made an important point when noting that semioticians do not find an item significant because it appears frequently within a text. Rather, a “social semioticians would emphasize the significance which readers attach to the signs within a text” (p. 8). According to Danesi (1999),

A text is “weaving together” elements taken from a specific code in order to communicate something. When someone speaks to another or writes a letter, he or she is engaged in making a verbal text; when someone selects clothing items, he or she is making a bodily text; and when people employ certain gestures during courtship, they are making sexual texts. (p. 6)

A medium containing the text can represent a number of different areas, depending on the theorist and discipline involved. For example, a medium can refer to
broad categories, such as speech; specific technical forms, such as radio or television; interpersonal media, such as the telephone; or the sensory channels involved with the communication, such as tactile or visual (Chandler, 2002; Fairclough, 1995; Jean, 1998).

**Principles of Semiotic Analysis**

There are three general principles that underlie semiotic analysis. The first is that all systems of everyday life have tribal roots. Danesi (1999) emphasized that this inclination towards tribalism reverberates constantly within humans. He noted that,

> A modern society is a super-tribe, a collectivity of individuals who do not necessarily trace their ancestral roots back to the founding tribe, but who participate in the signifying order of that tribe as it has evolved over time. Participation in that order allows individuals to interact in both spontaneous and ritualistic ways that are perceived as “normal.” (p. 16)

The second principle is that the systems of everyday life tend to influence people’s perceptions of what is natural in human behavior. Danesi (1999) pointed out that a task of the semiotician is to separate what is truly natural from the conventional. For example, in America today it is perceived as natural that women wear lipstick and high heels and unnatural for men to do so. In Baroque 17th century, it was considered natural for aristocratic men to wear high heels. Classifying clothing or cosmetics in terms of gender is historically-based social convention, not naturalness (Danesi, 2002; Jean, 1998; Semali, 2002).

The third principle states that systems of everyday life influence world-views. For example, in health issues, a person’s evaluation of, and response to, the body’s warning signs are mediated by culture. As Danesi (1999) noted “the ways in which a tribe or society understands and defines health will largely determine how it views and treats disease . . . and what features of body image it considers to be attractive or abnormal” (p. 20).
By deconstructing social symbols such as cigarettes, high heels, and music, implicit world-views can be exposed. By understanding the images through semiotic analysis, audiences can become more active interpreters of signs (Semali, 2002).

**What Is Semiotics?**

Semiotics is concerned with meaning-making and representation in human interaction, looking at “how signs are used to relate, depict, portray, or reproduce something perceived, sensed, imagined, or felt in some physical form” (Danesi, 2002, p. 3). Semiotics probes human nature by unraveling the meaning of the symbols, known more as *signs*, that make up the system of everyday life that we call a culture or society (Barthes, 1964). Semiotic inquiry examines sign systems as vehicles of meaning in a culture and how they capture social values about human relationships, myths, belief systems and established norms (Semali, 2002). Through semiotics we can analyze how linguistic and nonlinguistic cultural signs form widely understood systems of meanings such as when giving a flower is a sign of love or getting an “A” on a test is a sign of success in meeting established requirements (Danesi, 2002).

Semiotics involves the study of anything which stands for something else. Signs can take the form of words, images, sounds, gestures, and objects. Semioticians study a sign as part of sign systems to determine how meanings are formed and reality is represented (Barthes, 1964; Chandler, 2002; Fry & Fry, 1985; Jean, 1998). Eco (1976) gave a broad definition for the field:

Semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign. A sign is everything which can be taken as significantly substituting for something else. This something else does not necessarily have to exist or to actually be somewhere at the moment in which a sign stands for it. (p. 7)
Beyond this most basic definition, there is considerable variation among
semioticians about what constitutes semiotic inquiry. Semiotics is concerned with how
anything in the world can be assigned a specific meaning, studying all cultural
interactions as communication processes. There are two central concerns of all
semioticians: the relationship between a sign and its meaning and the way signs are
combined into codes. How a sign is given meaning will be explored in detail, reviewing
how signs are categorized into different groups, such as iconic, indexical, and symbolic.

Codes are systems of signs (gestures, movements, words, glances) that human
beings routinely use to develop and send messages. For example, the signs in a dress
code are clothing items worn in different combinations to send socially meaningful
messages. Codes mediate social relationship and, therefore, are effective shapers of how
we think about ourselves and others (Chandler, 2002; Danesi, 1999; Eco, 1976; Fiske &

Semiology takes in any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits;
images, gestures, musical sounds, objects, and the complex association of all
these, which form the content of ritual, convention or public entertainment: these
constitute, if not languages, at least a system of signification. There is no doubt
that the development of mass communications confers particular relevance today
upon the vast field of signifying media. (p. 9)

What Is a Sign?

The basic goal of semiotics is to identify what constitutes a sign and what its
meanings are. There are three primary dimensions to a sign. First, there is a physical
dimension: the sounds that comprise the words or the movements that define a gesture.
This is interchangeably called the signifier, the representamen, or the sign. Second, there
is a representational dimension: the actual function of the sign, how it directs attention to
some entity (object, event, or idea). This is called the referent, object, or signified.
Finally, there is a conceptual dimension, where the sign evokes different meanings for different people. This dimension is called signification, interpretation, or meaning.

For example, a cigarette has a certain shape, feel, and taste. However, cigarettes also have a number of cultural meanings—signifying exciting risk-taking or poor health habits, depending on what interpretation the sign evokes in someone at a certain point (Chandler, 2002; Danesi, 1999; Jean, 1998; Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993).

It is necessary to also note that signs contain several levels of meaning, or signification. A photograph or road sign both can represent a car, but there can be additional semiotic meanings for the car, such as freedom or wealth, depending on the cultural background of the image reader. Barthes (1968) discussed how signs work in different orders of signification. He claimed that signs also operate as myth-makers and connotative agents. According to Fiske and Hartley (1978), it is important to study the ideas of myth-making and connotation in mass media communication “because they are crucial to an understanding of the way television conveys its full meaning” (p. 41).

Types of Signs

Semioticians commonly sort signs into different groups or types. Pierce identified 66 potential varieties of signs. Three of the identified signs have gained wide acceptance: the concepts of icon, index, and symbol (Chandler, 2002; Danesi, 2002; Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993). Leeds-Hurwitz succinctly stated how these three types of signs were delineated:

The relationship between the signifier and the signified serves as focus of attention: An icon has the relationship of similarity; an index has the relationship of connection; a symbol has the relationship of arbitrariness. For example, a photograph of a bride is an icon; it resembles her. The top of the wedding cake kept for the first anniversary celebration is an index; it formed a piece of the original event. The bride’s white dress is traditionally a symbol of virginity, standing for something it neither resembles or was taken from. (p. 23)
It is also important to recognize that the same sign can serve as icon, index, or symbol simultaneously or in different contexts. For example, a gold wedding band can be an icon (it is similar in form to other wedding bands); an index to the wedding ceremony (it was part of the original event); and a symbol of the relationship (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993).

**Iconic signs.** In the iconic sign, there is a natural relationship between the signifier and the signified. In other words, the signifier (physical image) represents the appearance of the signified (mental image), as in a photograph or portrait. The more closely the signifier represents our common experience, the more realistic it appears to be (Barthes, 1974; Chandler, 2002).

**Indexical signs.** An index is a sign that stands for, or points out, something in relation to something else. Indexes do not resemble their referents, as icons do; they identify them or where they are. The signifier is directly connected in some way to the signified. The link can be observed or inferred. Examples would include medical symptoms (pain, a rash), pointers (a pointing index finger, a directional sign), or measuring instruments (a clock, a thermometer) (Chandler, 2002; Danesi, 2002).

**Symbolic signs.** When developing symbolic signs, users agree that “this sign shall mean this.” The signifier (physical) relates to its signified (mental) through that agreement. It is important to note that symbolic meanings are all established by social convention (Chandler, 2002). For example, Western culture uses colors to connote specific representations (white stand for goodness, black indicates evil, and red connotes passion) (Danesi, 2002).

Another common symbolic sign is language. There is no necessary relation between a word and its meaning. For example, we may not understand the Italian word for bridge, but we would understand the iconic road sign that depicted one. Saussure (as
quoted in Eco, 1976) observed that “Language is limited by nothing in the choice of means, for apparently nothing would prevent the associating of any idea whatsoever with just any sequence of sounds” (p. 76).

Language is an integral component of how signification develops within a culture. Objects, images, and patterns can, and do, signify specific things, but never without a linguistic base. For example, when there is a strong visual (i.e., in movies or television), the meaning is confirmed through duplication in a linguistic message (Barthes, 1967; Eco, 1976).

**Function of the Social Symbol**

Jean (1998) summarized the historical development of symbols in society:

We invent new signs and icons every day. What happens to those created over thousands of years of human civilization? Some are lost, abandoned to oblivion, while others endure—retaining or altering their meaning, becoming less or more important to us. Time tests a sign’s capacity to anchor itself in the history of a people, or to transcend it and inscribe itself in our collective memory. *Time turns signs into symbols.* (p. 103)

According to Danesi (1999), “practically everything in human representation tends towards the symbolic. This is why the 20th century philosopher Ernst Cassirer (1874-1945) characterized the human animal as a symbolic animal” (p. 36).

Questions that one might ask when examining the nature and role of symbols in human interaction include determining whether symbol-using is a defining characteristic of human activity; what serves as a sign or symbol; how do people acquire or recognize symbols; and what value the symbol holds to society (Chandler, 2002; Jean, 1998; Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993). Through symbols people create a social reality for themselves, developing an overlay of meaning across the natural world. The functions of symbols are generally recognized as a way for humans to make sense of the world and as a way to
convey information in a short amount of time or across generations (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993).

**Cultural “Roles” of Signs**

**Signs as myth-makers**

A sign that carries cultural meaning, and is not just representational, has moved into what Barthes (1968) called a “second order of signification” (p. 40). As such, the sign changes its role. For example, the sign (a handcuffed Iraqi soldier) becomes the signifier of the cultural values presented in television news. The cultural meaning of the soldier is what Barthes calls a myth. The soldier-sign is not presented as a human being with myriad social complications, but rather as a visual myth representing our perceived reality of the current war. Fiske and Hartley (1978) pointed out that,

> The myth is validated from two directions: first from the specificity and iconic accuracy of the first-order sign (the visual of the soldier), and second from the extent to which the second-order sign meets our cultural needs (handcuffed in the news). These needs require the myth to relate accurately to reality out-there (the war), and also to bring that reality into line with appropriate cultural values (U.S. voluntary involvement with the war). (p. 42)

In semiotics, a myth is not necessarily a false belief, but an extended metaphor. Signs and codes are often generated by myths and serve to maintain them. Like metaphors, myths help us make sense of our cultural experiences—serving to organize shared ways of conceptualizing something within a culture (Chandler, 2002; Cobley & Jansz, 1999). According to Fiske and Hartley (1978),

> The myths which operate as organizing structures . . . cannot themselves be discrete and unorganized, for that would negate their prime function (which is to organize meaning): they are themselves organized into a coherence that we might call a mythology or an ideology . . . reflecting the broad principles by which a culture organizes and interprets its reality. (p. 46)
Barthes is widely known for deconstructing cultural myths in the 1950s when he wrote a series of essays “showing how the denotations in the signs of popular culture betray connotations which are themselves ‘myths’ generated by the larger sign system that makes up society” (Cobley & Jansz, 1999, p. 43). For Barthes (1977), myths served the ideological function of naturalizing the cultural—in other words, to make dominant cultural and historical values, attitudes and beliefs seem entirely natural and therefore true reflections of the ways things are. The power of such myths is that they “go without saying” and so appear not to need to be deciphered, interpreted, or demystified (Chandler, 2002).

Fiske and Hartley (1978) also noted that myths are dynamic, constantly changing and updating themselves. They noted that television plays an important role in the process of myth-making because “it constantly tests the myths against reality and shows when their explanatory power has decreased” (p. 43).

**How signs can denote and connote meaning**

Denotation is a direct specific meaning distinct from an implied or associated idea. In other words, a soldier’s uniform denotes rank (a general). Connotation is the suggestion of a meaning by a word apart from the thing it explicitly names or describes (the general’s uniform connotes a certain amount of respect or disdain, depending on cultural parameters) (Chandler, 2002). However, Cobley and Jansz (1999) noted that it is almost impossible to separate denotation and connotation, noting “the identification of denotation only takes place when connotation is theoretically deleted from the equation. Identification of what signs depict—especially pictorial ones—happen so quickly that it is easy to forget that it has happened at all” (p. 50).
Barthes (1967) argued that connotation is the result of human intervention in the process of sign-making (for example, how images are manipulated in television production). According to Fiske and Hartley, “connotation is expressive, involving subjective rather than objective experience, and is essentially the way in which the encoder transmits his feelings or judgments about the subject of the message” (p. 45).

Television, film, and other visual media use a variety of methods to connote meaning, such as camera angles, lighting, sound effects, cropping images, and background music. Music, in particular, is used to set moods, sometimes creating the connotative meaning of a visual. As a culture, we subjectively agree on the denotative and connotative meaning of certain signs. This intersubjectivity is one of the ways through which we express cultural membership (Eco, 1976; Fry & Fry, 1985; Jean, 1998).

However, due to variations in culture and/or context, audience members may produce unexpected interpretations of a text. Eco (1976) called this phenomenon “aberrant decoding,” which refers to when decodings are different from the encoder’s intended meaning. As noted by Chandler (2002), “mass media codes offer their readers social identities which some may adopt. But readers do not necessarily accept such codes. When communicators do not share common codes and social positions, decodings are likely to be different than the intended meaning” (p. 179).

Because signs in mass media messages convey numerous intertwined meanings, the text is capable of producing multiple levels of denoted and connoted meaning. According to Fry and Fry (1985), “a media text is not simply a transmitter of a particular meaning from source to receiver; instead, a text is a resource or matrix of possible meanings” (p. 445). For example, a music video can connote different meanings to
audience members. A teenager may view the video as a rebellious statement against
dominant social conventions. A media researcher may study the video to determine what
the images convey to audiences. A record company executive may see the video as an
effective promotional tool to develop product sales. Each viewer would agree on the
primary concept: they viewed a music video. However, divergent connotations may
emerge concerning the content of the video (the dancers looked young; the music was
loud; the production was poor, etc).

The adolescent, researcher and record executive are all drawing from their
cultural backgrounds to develop significant correlations between expression and content.
Culturally, the music video content signifies different meanings for each viewer (Fry &
Fry, 1985).

Semiotics, the Mass Media, and Media Literacy

Semiotics is an approach to communication which focuses on meaning and
interpretation. The primary object of media semiotics is to study how the mass media
create or recycle signs for their own ends (Danesi, 2002; Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993). As noted
earlier, Roland Barthes initiated the study of media genres in the 1950s, using basic sign
theory to analyze different media to expose the implicit meanings built into them (Jean,
1998). Media signs do not just convey meaning, but constitute a medium in which
meanings are constructed. Danesi (2002) noted that

In identifying and documenting media structures, the semiotician is guided by
three basic questions:
1. What does a certain structure (text, genre, etc.) mean?
2. How does it represent what it means?
3. Why does it mean what it means? (p. 23)

Danesi (2002) provided an interesting example of this breakdown through
deconstruction of Superman, the comic book hero. He pointed out that Superman is a
“recycled” or “mediated” hero, providing an updated version of the mythic superhuman heroes, such as Hercules. Examples of this recycled signification system include how Superman comes from another planet (mythic heroes are sent by the gods to Earth) and how Superman helps good people in trouble (mythic heroes help humans run their affairs).

A semiotics-based approach to media studies looks at meanings and messages in all forms and all contexts. The meaning of a text is conditioned by the context. The context is the physical, psychological, and social situation in which the text was constructed or to which it refers (Chandler, 2002; Danesi, 1999, 2002; Semali, 2002). Reflecting the stance of linguist Roman Jakobson (1896-1982), both Danesi (2002) and Semali (2002) argue that context should be considered a basic component of any model of communication. Danesi noted “Contextual analysis involves determining who says what to whom; where, when, why and how it was said; what effect it produces; and what codes are involved in the creation and production of a text” (p. 45).

When talking about media texts, we refer to all signs and symbols that mediate meaning to us (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993). Semali (2002) stated,

In a semiotics-based media literacy framework, students analyze media messages—they examine the signs and symbols in the media text, whether they are sounds, written words, electronically produced images, musical notes, or even objects—which stand for or represent to the reader, viewer, or audiences the concepts, ideas and emotions of the author or producer. In producing texts, they use similar signs and symbols. (p. 15)

Semali’s text, Transmediation in the Classroom: A Semiotics-Based Media Literacy Framework, is based on the idea that humans use multiple sign systems or codes to make sense of the human experience or the world around them. For example, students come to school with extensive knowledge about the Internet, and about visuals from a
variety of sources, including television, video games, films, cartoons, advertising, and other graphic depictions. As visually literate 21st Century consumers, these students draw from a wide repertoire when constructing knowledge. The most common intertextual connections students make are to movies and the mass media, especially to pop music (Semali, 2002).

When developing media literacy skills, the students struggle to tease out the signs or codes through which meaning is communicated to achieve understanding in broad perspectives. In the pursuit of deep meaning, students encounter a multitude of symbols, codes, and sign systems that they must constantly interpret. When an explanation is not readily available, the dominant ideology or myth is adopted as a way to explain the “way it is.” (Semali, 2002)

Semiotics has the potential to provide significant support in the study of communication systems. As Leeds-Hurwitz (1993) noted, “Communication researchers study communication, which presupposes a common signification system. Semiotics is the study of signification systems, therefore communication researchers may find it useful” (p. 12).

In mass communication research, semiotic analysts must avoid taking a specific orientation regarding the power of media systems or the total control of audiences. In other words, “a semiotic model must address the question of the relative power of both the text and audience in determining the meaning of media texts” (Fry & Fry, 1985, p. 444). It is necessary to recognize the capability of mass media texts to produce multiple levels of meaning that are then reduced by an audience’s interpretation of the text (Chandler, 2002; Fry & Fry, 1985).

Semiotics provides researchers with a conceptual framework and a set of methods and concepts that can be used across a full range of signifying practices, including gesture, posture, dress, writing, speech, photography, and the mass media (Chandler,
2002). Social semiotics helps us understand how the same text may generate different meanings for different readers. Cobley and Jansz (1999) asked “Is it the case that a text has as many meanings as there are readers?” (p. 158)

**Research Questions**

Specific research questions that evolved after reviewing the literature for at-risk adolescents, symbolic interaction, media literacy, semiotics and music videos are the following:

- What do at-risk adolescent girls learn from watching music videos?
- What are the specific nonverbal and verbal music video signs and symbols discussed by participants?
- Does this population recognize a need for media literacy curriculum?
“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?” asked Alice.
“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.
Lewis Carroll, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland (1865)

**Tenets of Qualitative Research**

As Lindlof and Taylor (2002) indicate, research methods form the practical aspects of larger systems of belief about the nature of reality (ontology) and about how that reality may be known (epistemology). These beliefs form a code through which communication researchers identify their work as the product of a particular tradition, or research paradigm. However, “everyone acknowledges that no method can deal with more than a tiny fragment of reality” (Lang & Engel Lang, 1991, p. 194).

Qualitative research differs from a positivist, or scientific, research tradition, which assumes a singular and specific reality measured by an objective epistemology using quantitative methodologies (Silverman, 2002). In contrast to this perspective, qualitative researchers seek to preserve and analyze the situated form, content, and experience of social action. Jankowski and Wester (1991) define qualitative research as “a form of long-term first-hand observation conducted in close proximity to the phenomena under study. The focus of qualitative social science is on everyday life and its significance as perceived by participants” (p. 44).

The concept of *verstehen*, or empathetic understanding of the meaning that people give their social situation and activities, is a fundamental concept in qualitative research.
Noted by Schwandt (2003) as “a method peculiar to the social sciences” (p. 299), verstehen is a process through which the social scientist seeks to understand the primary experience of meaning-making.

The constructivist paradigm underlying many qualitative research studies “assumes a relativist ontology (there are multiple realities), a subjectivist epistemology (knower and respondent cocreate understandings), and a naturalistic (in the natural world) set of methodological procedures” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 35). The paradigm also recognizes the importance of cultural symbol systems, the validity of verbal and narrative documentation, and the researcher’s intimacy with the research process (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). As Denzin and Lincoln (2000) noted, “it is understood that each practice makes the world visible in a different way” (p. 4).

Warren (2001) explained that qualitative researchers make cultural inferences from three sources: what people say, the ways they act, and the artifacts they use (p. 85). Actual talk, gesture, and other forms of communication are considered the raw materials of analysis. For example, during interviews, qualitative researchers treat the unfolding social contexts of the interview as data, not as something to eliminate from the interview process (Warren, 2001). Silverman (2001) and Denzin and Lincoln (2003) point to how qualitative researchers employ a wide range of interconnected interpretive practices, using empirical materials such as interviews, artifacts, and visual and observational texts to gain an authentic understanding of people’s experiences and how they actively create meaning.

As Silverman (2001) indicates, there are four major methods used by qualitative researchers: observation, interviews, analyzing texts and documents, and recording and transcribing. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2003), qualitative research is inherently
multi-method in focus, which reflects an attempt to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study. They note,

We can know a thing only through its representation. Triangulation is not a tool or a strategy of validation, but an alternative to validation. The combination of multiple methodological practices, empirical materials, perspectives, and observers in a single study is best understood as a strategy that adds rigor, breadth, complexity, richness and depth to any inquiry. (p. 5)

According to Jankowski and Wester (1991), triangulation can be a constructive force in the development of methodology as well as theory. It can stimulate inventive uses of familiar research methods, and thus help to uncover unexpected dimensions of the area of inquiry. It may also allow for more confidence in the conclusions of qualitative studies. Perhaps most important, triangulation can assist in constructing a more encompassing perspective on specific analyses, or “thick description” (p. 62). As Silverman (2001) noted, the use of triangulation should operate according to two ground rules: begin from a theoretical perspective, and choose methods and data which will give an account of structure and meaning from within that perspective (p. 234).

One of the assumptions of a multiple method strategy is that such an approach provides for more valid results than a single research strategy. Jankowski and Wester (1991), note that “the basic assumption of all triangulation is that the weaknesses in each single method will be compensated by the counter-balancing strengths of another” (p. 62), and Denzin and Lincoln (2003), claim that “triangulation is the display of multiple, refracted realities simultaneously” (p. 6).

Positivist criticisms of qualitative research include the observations that the work is anecdotal (is not objective social science), does not provide consistent results (is not reliable in terms of replication), and is not valid (does not give accurate and generalizable measurements of the truth). As Denzin and Lincoln note (2003), “positivists allege that
qualitative researchers write fiction, not science, and that these researchers have no way of verifying their truth statements. Thus is the textual, narrative turn rejected by the positivists” (p. 12). Proponents of qualitative research answer these criticisms with the alternative evaluative criteria of trustworthiness (or “truth” value), credibility, confirmability, transferability and authenticity and identify a different type of reliability (Leininger, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 2003).

Qualitative constructivist researchers tend to have an antifoundational orientation toward truth, which is noted as “a refusal to adopt any permanent, unvarying (or foundational) standard by which truth can be universally known” (Lincoln & Guba, 2003, p. 273). Charon explained the difficulty of ascertaining who has truth, whether there is a real truth to be found, and determining the best way to find the truth. He noted that “people interact over a period of time; out of that they come to share a perspective; what they see will be interpreted through that perspective; often each perspective tells us something very important about what is really true” (Charon, 2001, p. 1) In other words, truth, and agreements about what constitutes valid knowledge, arise from negotiations between members of a community. Recognizing the varying perspectives, or multitude of realities, that actors bring to a situation adds trustworthiness to the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 2003).

Credibility also refers to the “truth” value or believability of findings that have been established by the researcher through prolonged observations or participation with the situation under study. Confirmability refers to the repeated direct participatory and documented evidence observed or obtained from primary informant sources (Leininger, 1994). It means obtaining direct affirmations of what the researcher has heard, seen, or experienced concerning the phenomena under study. Means of establishing
confirmability and credibility include member checks and audit trails. As Lindlof and Taylor note (2002), “the logic of member validation is that, presumably, culture members are capable of assessing the descriptions that others write of their practices, routines, and beliefs” (p. 242).

Transferability refers to whether particular findings can be transferred to a similar context situation and still preserve the specific meanings, interpretations, and findings from the completed study. However, since the goal of qualitative research is not to provide generalizations, the transferability criterion focuses on general similarities of findings under similar conditions or contexts (Leininger, 1994, p. 107).

The authenticity criteria identified by Lincoln and Guba (2003) are fairness, ontological authenticity, educative authenticity, catalytic authenticity, and tactical authenticity. Fairness refers to a quality of balance, where the researcher ensures that all participants have a chance to be represented in any texts. Ontological and educative authenticity are designated as criteria for “determining a raised level of awareness” (Lincoln & Guba, 2003, p. 278) in the research participants. Catalytic and tactical authenticities refer to the ability of a research inquiry to prompt participants to “take action for positive social change and forms of emancipatory community action” (Lincoln & Guba, 2003, p. 278). This point is highly criticized by positivists because a direct action by the researcher is thought to destabilize objectivity and introduce biased subjectivity. However, Lincoln and Guba (2003) contest this perception, noting that “objectivity is a chimera: a mythological creature that never existed, save in the imagination of those who believe that knowing can be separated from the knower” (p. 279).
Silverman (2001) noted that qualitative studies can achieve high reliability through using what he calls “low-inference descriptors” (p. 226). This process involves “recording observations in terms that are as concrete as possible, including verbatim accounts of what people say rather than researchers’ general reconstructions of what a person said, which would allow researchers’ personal perspectives to influence the reporting” (p. 227).

**Theoretical Perspectives**

The theoretical orientations of symbolic interactionism and semiotics in this study point to the importance of verbal and nonverbal communicative signs used in human interaction. As noted by Lindlof and Taylor (2002), symbolic interactionism “resonates with communications research through emphasizing the role of symbolic expression, explaining relationships among actors’ understandings, motives and message design practices, and scrutinizing the meanings inherent in social phenomena” (p. 43).

As a social science theoretical perspective, symbolic interactionism focuses on the behavior of human beings. According to Blumer (1969), “symbolic interactionism is a down-to-earth approach to the scientific study of human group life and human conduct. Its empirical world is the natural world of such group life and conduct” (p. 47). Researchers using this perspective examine and analyze the interaction of daily experiences, focusing on the use of symbolic social signs in human interaction. Signs are noted as a primary way humans interact with reality, entering into a continuous process of meaning production (Charon, 2001; Blumer, 1969).

The general theory of semiotics provides us with a deeper understanding of human communication with signs, symbols, and images (Semali, 2002). The semiotician is an observer of how people communicate, looking for information that reveals
something pertinent about human activity—constantly asking what does this or that mean? (Danesi, 1999).

Semiotics provides researchers with a conceptual framework and a set of methods and concepts that can be used across a full range of signifying practices, including gesture, posture, dress, writing, speech, photography, and the mass media (Chandler, 2002). Semioticians involved with mass media research note that media are the storytellers of our time, and provide recognizable social symbols as shortcuts to reach audiences (Coble & Jansz, 1999; Danesi, 1999; Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993).

**Research Protocol**

Through employing a triangulation method of data-gathering, the researcher looked for cultural categories, significant symbols, and shared meanings that at-risk adolescent girls construct about music videos, and how the videos may play a role in the shaping of gender roles and other identity issues. The researcher learned about this population’s perceptions of music videos through using recorded interviews, participant observation, collection of media artifacts (1-week media diaries denoting use of music videos and “room culture” photographs), and transcription. As Huntemann and Morgan (2001) indicate

Identity is an active process, as is the negotiation of symbolic media messages into the everyday life of children and adults. Understanding these critical processes will require creative syntheses of the entire spectrum of methodological approaches. Ethnographic methods, such as one-to-one interviews and participant observation, can provide thick description of daily life, allowing for the messy and complex connections between identity and culture. (p. 319)

The researcher recognizes that the study does not provide a representative sample of at-risk adolescent girls. However, the participants can provide data about how they perceive music videos. Through member checks and an audit trail, the researcher established trustworthiness and gained credibility.
Steele and Brown (1995) and Strasburger and Wilson (2002) indicate that the mass media, and the cultural views they present, are a significant information source for adolescent identity formation. They note how teens appropriate and transform media messages and images to help them make sense of the world, especially in regard to identity-related issues such as gender role learning, preparation for specific occupations, and the development of values and beliefs (Strasburger & Wilson, 2002). However, as Klein et al. (1993) indicate, a negative aspect of this cultural environment is that media portrayals of risky behavior also may help promote or reinforce the behaviors through influences on individual values and risk perception.

In constructing the parameters of this study, music videos were chosen as an auto-driving tool to prompt responses from participants during in-depth interviews. According to Green (1991) “interviewing provides an opportunity for combining practical, analytical, and interpretive approaches to media” (p. 223). And Eder and Fingerson (2002) point out that

One reason for interviewing youthful respondents is to allow them to give voice to their own interpretations and thoughts rather than rely solely on our adult interpretations of their lives . . . to find out how they are interpreting the messages they receive through various media. (p. 181)

Music videos were chosen because of their pervasive presence in today’s youth culture. Much of the social information teens consider important comes from music videos (Roberts, Christenson, Henriksen, & Bandy, 2002). Music video has altered the television viewing, music listening, and record-buying habits of the young people who constitute its audience (Strasburger & Wilson, 2002). According to Roberts et al. (2002) “19% of all teens and 32% of African American teens name music videos as one of the two most influential sources for finding out about new trends” (p. 7).
Researchers note that, on average, American adolescents spend between 4 and 5 hours a day listening to music and watching music videos. However, estimates of actual music video viewing range from 15 minutes to 5 hours a day (Roberts et al., 2002). According to Zollo (1995), teenagers watch an average of 5 hours of MTV every week (p. 78). Girls 11 to 19 years of age watch MTV more than any other network (Kidscreen, 1998); and African-American teens spend more time viewing BET (Black Entertainment Television, Zollo, 1995, p. 79).

**Participants**

Setting up and conducting 40 interviews with at-risk adolescent girls, aged 11 to 20, took approximately 10 months, beginning January 2004 and ending the last week of October 2004. Reasons for this extended time frame included the myriad difficulties in accessing this population, coordinating logistics with five organizations, and the four hurricanes that hit Florida. The interviews took 6 months to set up and were conducted from August through October 2004. Although the interviewees were segmented homogenously as at-risk adolescent females in Florida, there was some heterogeneity regarding their psychographic and demographic profiles.

The adolescent population that is identified as at-risk is heavily protected by state and national privacy laws, organizational bylaws, and staff concerns about exposing these children to additional harm. Gaining access to at-risk adolescents was a complicated process that involved many cold calls, presentations to administrators, and follow-up documentation. Several months were spent soliciting social service agencies in Gainesville, St. Augustine, and Jacksonville, Florida. Initial organizations that expressed interest were unable to participate because the Department of Juvenile Justice Institutional Review Board (IRB) did not approve the study.
Because of the sensitive nature of this topic, the researcher developed a snowball sampling method, which led to several referrals within the juvenile justice system and other youth agencies. The Alpha Omega Miracle Home (AOMH) in St. Augustine, Florida, was the first group that allowed access to its residents. This organization provides residence and a high school education to pregnant women aged 15 to 21 years. The Children’s Home Society (CHS) also chose to participate, allowing access to their 20 foster care residents in Jacksonville, Florida. CHS has 19 centers located throughout the Southeast United States that supply a variety of children’s services, ranging from adoption to residential care. The third organization that participated is Girls, Inc., a national nonprofit that focuses on the developmental needs of young women. Girls, Inc. opened a Teen Center in Jacksonville, Florida, in August 2004 and provided an opportunity to work with 20 girls at the Center. In addition, The St. Gerard House in St. Augustine, a residential facility and school for pregnant teenagers, provided access to 24 students in its Life Skills/Psychology class. The fifth organization that participated was The Bridge of Northeast Florida. The Bridge administers a number of social services to underprivileged children throughout Duval County and allowed interaction with 15 girls in two of its afterschool programs.

Several of these organizations have expressed interest in developing cultural literacy and media education curriculum to aid their populations in negotiating today’s cultural environment. Each organization had different policies regarding music videos. The Alpha Omega Miracle Home and St. Gerard House did not usually allow their residents to watch music videos while on site. The Bridge and Girls, Inc. did not monitor
how or when girls watched music videos. CHS did not try to control the media habits of
their residents, other than requiring specific times for television viewing. Administrators
in all five organizations were concerned about the impact of music videos, so were
willing to relax regulations during this study.

The researcher initially visited each site to establish familiarity and trust with
potential participants and to gain an understanding of the philosophy and culture of the
organization(s). This process took place prior to the in-depth interviews. In the five
organizations that participated, a majority of the staff and administrators were African
American. An interesting aspect that emerged was how the black culture emerged
through language and social norms in each voluntary group. For example, the salutation
used to introduce the researcher was Miss Helena. It became clear that this was a
respectful moniker used in the black community to designate a person in authority.

In addition, there were several instances of language, or slang, which indicated a
cultural preference among the African American participants. However, this was not
specific to the ethnic group, but rather it was prevalent in the groups in which they were
the majority. For example, at CHS and Girls, Inc., the language was consistently
peppered with slang words. Examples of these words include “fly” (i.e., flashy), movies
(i.e., music videos), hoochie mama (i.e., sexually loose woman), and “krunked” (getting
high on drugs or alcohol).

Because of the nature of the study, organizations, and participants, it was
important that the researcher act quickly when given access to the groups. Therefore, a
great deal of the research was gathered simultaneously from the five organizations. This
also was an unplanned experience and speaks to the need of a qualitative researcher to
maintain flexibility and a complete focus on the data gathering. It was difficult to schedule these logistics, but mandatory in order to gain access and cooperation from participants.

During the visits, the researcher asked each of the participants to take photos of her bedroom, in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the room cultures. Current research indicates that teen bedrooms provide a window to understanding what music, media models, and other cultural icons are important to adolescent identity formation. The participants living in residential facilities were asked to photograph any personal items that supervisors permitted them to include. In addition, the researcher requested that participants keep a 1-week diary documenting their use of music videos. The diaries were structured simplistically so participants could easily document their media use. The researcher distributed informed consent forms, diaries, and disposable cameras to interested participants (see Appendix B for the media diary).

**Interviews**

**Factors to Consider**

Interviews were used because they provided data about how adolescent at-risk females perceive music videos, giving the researcher an opportunity to review similarities and differences in participant perceptions about these videos. Eder and Fingerson (2001) support this perception, noting that “although some boys regularly discuss media events in their daily conversations, girls are much less likely to do so on a regular basis. Thus, for collecting girls’ interpretations of media, conducting interviews is a much more efficient method than observation” (p. 182).
During the process of inquiry, it is important for the researcher to begin by examining and maintaining sensitivity to the power dynamics between adults and youth. As noted by Eder and Fingerson (2001), “In general, children have lower status than adults and lack power in Western societies” (p. 182). The researchers emphasize reciprocity as a central means for responding to the potential power inequality inherent in an interview between an adult and youthful respondents. They note a number of ways to implement reciprocity, including self-disclosing, behaving in ways that empower respondents, taking action within the community where respondents reside, and encouraging self-reflection and development of insight in respondents.

Other relational elements between the interviewee and interviewer also must be noted. Warren (2001) suggested that, during interviews, both the researcher and respondents speak to each other from perspectives that incorporate the structured and historically grounded roles of their society, especially in relation to gender, class, and race. Warren also noted that “although situational, these perspectives shape the flow of the interview and, in its qualitative version, are taken into account by the interviewer in understanding the meaning-making process” (p. 84).

The researcher attempted to bracket her social and political orientation as a liberal, well-educated, single, and financially successful female who has lived in middle-to-high-income areas of the United States. Looking through the empathetic lens of a woman who has assisted young female family members coping with a high-risk lifestyle, the researcher acknowledges her propensity to pursue “qualitative research with an emancipatory objective” (Jankowski & Wester, 1991, p. 57). However, this enthusiasm also may bring a positive element to the process. As Warren (2001) noted, “among the ethnographic qualities of the interview itself is that the interview unfolds reflexively as
each participant looks at the world through the other’s eyes, incorporating both self and other into the process of interpretation” (p. 98).

As a music lover with substantial interest in the manipulation of public opinion and development of gender roles, this study held special relevance to the researcher. While there were significant demographic and psychographic differences between the participants and the researcher, there were also a surprising number of similarities regarding perceptions of gender roles and how adults generally view youth culture. The researcher was involved with many conversations regarding the roles of today’s young women and their confusion regarding social expectations. The participants also often interpreted their language, or slang, which empowered them as they taught the researcher current language trends.

In research on adolescents, Eder and Fingerson (2001) indicate the pertinence of representing youth in their own language and terminology. Giving the participants a voice in data analysis and presentation maintains their power in the research interaction and preserves their conceptions and meanings in the analysis and text (pp. 196-197). In addition, “individual interviews conducted by adult females provided girls with opportunities to think through issues of importance to them by talking about them with interested adults” (Eder & Fingerson, 2002, p. 186).

**Interview Process**

The researcher interviewed and audio-taped 40 participants. Of the study’s 40 participants, 8 were CHS residents, 5 were living in the Alpha Omega Miracle Home, 6 were from St. Gerard House, 10 from Girls, Inc., 2 were pilot study respondents, and 9 were attendees of The Bridge of NE Florida programs. The researcher conducted 27
individual interviews, 2 interviews of 2 girls together, and 2 focus groups (1 of 3 participants and 1 of 6 participants).

While this study was not designed to measure demographic variables, several specific participant demographics were noted to add substance to the study. Of 40 participants, 24 were African American, 1 Puerto Rican, and the remaining 15 girls were Caucasian. Thirteen of the participants aged 16 to 20 were either pregnant or already parents. Only four women of this subgroup were no longer minors. Of the four 20-year olds, two were pregnant with their second child, one with her first child, and the fourth cared for two children: her 1-year-old and her drug-addicted sister’s infant. This aspect of the study is skewed, because two of the participating organizations are set up specifically to care for pregnant teens. However, two of the CHS residents are also young parents (ages 16 and 17).

Nineteen of the 40 total participants were aged 11 to 14 years; 17 were aged 15 to 18 years, and 4 were 20 years of age. Sixteen of the respondents were enrolled in middle school, 19 in high school, 1 had been expelled from public high schools, and 4 (ages 17 to 20) had recently graduated with graduate equivalency diplomas (GED).

Table 3-1. Demographics of population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of participants</th>
<th>Ages</th>
<th>Level of schooling</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Status as parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>11-14</td>
<td>16 middle</td>
<td>6 white</td>
<td>no children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3 in high school</td>
<td>13 black</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>15-18</td>
<td>2 GED grads</td>
<td>7 white</td>
<td>9 with children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>14 high school</td>
<td>1 Puerto Rican</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>9 black</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>19-20</td>
<td>2 GED grads</td>
<td>2 white</td>
<td>4 with children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 high school</td>
<td>2 black</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data gained from the four 20-year-old respondents will not be addressed in this study. While the information is pertinent, this study was designed to measure
responses from adolescent girls 11 to 18 years of age. The data about 20-year olds will be used to develop further research about the perceptions of young women.

Each recorded interview lasted approximately 1 hour, although the interactions with participants were ongoing prior to and after the experience. The grand-tour questions were the most effective tools for eliciting in-depth narratives from participants regarding personal experience and social knowledge about the effects of music videos. Thirty-nine of the 40 participants had seen all three videos several times prior to the study. Only one respondent did not choose to watch music videos on a regular basis.

Participants watched three music videos that ran in current rotation on MTV and BET. Each participant viewed the videos twice, once with sound and once without sound. The reason for playing the videos without sound was to ascertain whether the audio interfered with processing the visual information. During the pilot study, participants noted more visual information when the music was not playing. The researcher observed the participants as they viewed the videos and noted any nonverbal or verbal reactions to the information. After viewing each video, the researcher asked the participant an initial set of questions about her perceptions and reactions to the data. After viewing all three videos, the participant was asked the remaining questions, which are larger in scope. Appendix A contains the question guide that was used for the interviews.

The topic range and specificity noted in these questions encouraged participants to discuss their experiences with the subject. In addition, the questions were designed to elicit depth and personal context from participants, which brought unexpected perceptions to the discussion. In addition, three questions were added after approximately 16 interviews, as it became clear that several more areas needed to be addressed.
The individual interviews yielded the most intensive and focused responses. The two groups of two (one of two sisters) were relatively informative, but the sisters tended to argue. The focus groups were the least informative of all the participants. It appeared that participants fell into a groupthink mentality, and became less responsive as the interview progressed. In addition, there was more interference from teachers during the focus groups, which may have played a role in the group’s lack of focus.

Participants and their guardians signed an informed consent that was approved by the University of Florida’s (UF) Institutional Review Board (IRB). There was no compensation for respondents that participated in the study. During the interview, the researcher interfered only if the interviewee digressed too much from the subject at hand. As this is an exploratory study, the researcher used the question guide but encouraged each participant to state her own viewpoints about related issues.

The interviews were audiotaped for purposes of transcription. As noted by Silverman (2001), the advantages of tapes are that they are public record, can be replayed and transcripts improved and they preserve sequences of talk (p. 189). After discussion with a few potential guardians and participants, the researcher ascertained that videotape would be considered obtrusive and problematic because of the youth of participants. Therefore, the interview research was conducted using audiotape, field notes, personal diary notes, and observational techniques.

Observation During Interviews

The importance of context and process in understanding human behavior is a core tenet of qualitative research. Eder and Fingerson (2001) point to how there are limitations to interviews, because “there are aspects of adolescent cultures that are difficult to put
into words, and these aspects need to be captured through direct observation. Field observation can increase the researcher’s general understanding of youth’s local culture and social structure” (p. 188). During observation, the focus is moved from what people are thinking to a more behavioral focus on what they are doing. A general question to ask is “what is going on here?”

Observations of participants were held during the interview process as they viewed and responded to the videos and then answered the questions. The researcher took field notes, which were transcribed immediately after the interviews. Each interview took place at the residence site or school. After each interview, the researcher continued to observe the participant to ascertain any continued reactions to the process.

The researcher recognized her role as a participant observer who looks, listens, and records during the interview process. One cannot study the social world without being part of it (Silverman, 2001). Lang and Engel Lang (1991) note “observational techniques combined with informant interviews can be . . . especially useful in probing the processes behind the social construction of events and in explaining how things ultimately come to be remembered” (p. 215).

**Choice of Music Videos**

The three music videos that were played during the interviews and observation cycle are listed below. These videos were chosen because of their tremendous popularity with young audiences. OutKast’s “Speakerboxxx/The Love Below” won the 2004 Grammy Awards Album of the Year, a top public and industry recognition for musicians. Missy Elliott won a Grammy for top Female Rap Solo Performance and was also a nominee for the Album of the Year award. According to Billboard magazine (Paoletta, 2004), “Elliott and OutKast create genre-blurring recordings. Neither is afraid to push the
boundaries of what is considered acceptable in the R&B/hip-hop world” (p. 5). In addition, Beyoncé Knowles won several Grammy Awards for her album, “Dangerously in Love,” including Contemporary R&B Album. The videos (Appendix F) are listed in the order in which they were viewed during the in-depth interviews:

1. **Artist:** OutKast  
   **Song:** “The way you move”  
   **Album:** Speakerboxxx/The Love Below

2. **Artist:** Beyoncé Knowles  
   **Song:** “Me, myself and I”  
   **Album:** Dangerously In Love

3. **Artist:** Missy Elliott  
   **Song:** “I’m really hot”  
   **Album:** This is Not a Test

**Diaries and Photographs**

The researcher used the photos and diaries as cross-referencing tools to determine consistencies in the patterns of response and themes apparent throughout the interviews, viewing diaries and room cultures of the participants. The researcher reviewed the media diaries and photographs while transcribing field notes and again while assessing interview transcriptions.

In researching identity formation, Danesi (1994), Brown et al. (1994), and Steele and Brown (1995) note that the bedroom is a safe, private space for many teens. According to their research, teen bedrooms are important havens often decorated to reflect teens’ sense of themselves and where they fit into the larger culture. The bedroom is denoted as a symbolic space defined through decorations (posters and photos), audio-visual equipment (stereos, DVD players, computers, appropriate music, and televisions), and tokens of peer friendship (gifts and letters). Gaining information about how
participants structure their private space allowed the researcher to further ascertain the role(s) media may play in identity construction for at-risk adolescent youth.

**Data Collection Issues**

The hurdles in conducting the study did not stop with gaining access to the at-risk teen population. It was then a challenge at each facility to solicit study participants and gain the support of house staff. It took a lot of energy to maintain this momentum throughout the 3 months of intensive data gathering.

At four of the organizations, a minimum of two additional site visits per interview were necessary for collection of diaries and cameras. The exception was The Bridge of NE Florida, where participants returned the artifacts immediately after completion. Despite staff support, other respondents were relatively irresponsible when given the task of returning media artifacts, which may be attributable to their age and identification as at-risk teens who are not well-schooled in established prosocial behaviors. After listening to what might motivate participants, the researcher designed and distributed individualized gift bags to the girls who completed all three aspects of the study. This was a successful incentive plan, and the diaries and cameras were returned much faster.

**Photographs**

Participants took photographs of their rooms to establish whether media music idols were a significant part of their private environments. Difficulties in collecting these data included the lack of private space for many participants (i.e., no bedroom or a shared space with other residents), and the attrition rate of disposable cameras once they were dispersed.

Most participants took photos of their rooms and other social environments that were important to them. Thirty disposable cameras were distributed, with the
understanding that two girls would share one camera to keep costs lower. Twenty-one
cameras were returned with 33 total sets of photos (33 of the 40 respondents took
photographs). Unfortunately, most of the girls did not follow the specified directions and
gave the researcher photos of themselves, family members, school, and other locations.
Reasons for this could include a lack of listening skills, relative unimportance attached to
authority expectations, embarrassment about their living space, excitement about having
a camera and simply ignoring any stipulated rules or expectations, and/or a lack of
comprehension and understanding of what the researcher wished to gain.

Only 14 girls photographed posters of TV, movie, and music video stars that were
attached to their bedroom walls. Popular music video artists the girls photographed
included Usher, JaRule, Chingy, B2K, Ashanti, Britney Spears, and Beyoncé. Most of the
posters were inserts gained from CD covers, which is indicated by the size and type of
the photographs (Appendix E).

Diaries

Thirty of the 36 participants completed media diaries. Only 10 of the 36 girls
analyzed the videos they viewed and wrote interesting comments about their perceptions.
The majority of respondents wrote generic comments, such as “I liked the video.”
Reasons for this could include a lack of literacy skills and subsequent embarrassment
and/or the relative unimportance they attached to documenting their use of music videos.
The participants also complained that the diaries were “too much like homework.”

It was a consistent struggle for most participants to complete and return the
1-week diaries within 3 weeks. However, most of the diaries provided some insight into
how these girls view the storytelling techniques of music videos. The primary themes
that were reflected in the diaries were gender relations, identity formation, and how
access to this media might impact youth.
Pilot Study

The pilot interviews were conducted with four young women ranging from 12 to 17 years of age. While not specifically identified as at-risk, the girls had experienced a number of the risk factors outlined in the literature review. The interviews yielded information about the validity of music videos that were chosen for viewing and discussion, the construct of the question guide, the necessary time frame for an effective interview (about 1 hour), and the overall participant perception of the project.

The interview question guide (Appendix A) was generally effective at gaining participant interaction. However, questions were revised based on suggestions from the respondents. In addition, participant response was not in keeping with the question order. The researcher was flexible, as participants thought of pertinent responses later in the interview.

There were no specific themes that emerged from the interviews regarding respondent perceptions and use of music videos. Actually, the different reactions to specific elements within the videos proved to be an important aspect of the study. The only consistent reaction of note was participant expectation that there was a right answer to the questions. The researcher had to consistently encourage participants to express their point of view about the videos. This was a relevant aspect of the study, as Eder and Fingerson (2001) noted, “the researcher must also take care to avoid creating situations that remind youth of classroom lessons based on ‘known-answer’ questions” (p. 184).

The observations of these four girls also gave the researcher data about their nonverbal reactions to music videos. Nonverbal responses ranged from keeping time to the music (toe-tapping or head bouncing) to sitting completely still while watching and listening to the videos. When the sound was turned off, all interviewees were relatively
still while they watched the videos, commenting on visuals they missed when listening to the music.

The initial interviews and observations provide a baseline for establishing how participants will interact during the study. Once they realized their perceptions were considered important, participants enthusiastically expressed their views about the videos. As one participant noted, “this is an interesting way to look at our music.”

**Methodological Assumptions and Weaknesses**

**Who’s Truth?**

Basic methodological assumptions and weaknesses include the homogeneous differences between the researcher and participants (which could be favorable), the potential problems with technology, visual scanning of environments by one researcher and the possible researcher bias reflected in interview questions. As noted by Johnson (2002), the critical ethical question for in-depth interviewing is “in a situation with multiple perspectives or interpretations, whose standards or criteria of truth are to prevail in the final report?” (p. 116).

Silverman (2001) also pointed to the tendency of qualitative researchers to select data to fit an ideal conception (or preconception) of the phenomenon. He noted that researchers also may select field data which are dramatic, rather than focusing on the less conspicuous data (p. 223). This problem, identified as anecdotalism, can be addressed through using two or more coders, and “making every effort to falsify initial assumptions about our data” (p. 254). This researcher avoided the problem by using another coder to identify themes within the data.

In addition, the process of observation is not without problems. When discussing observation as a methodology, Lang and Engel Lang (1991) pointed out,
Here too, as in other methods of inquiry, there are problems of observer bias, of replication, of subject reactivity, and so forth. No observer, or team of observers, can be everywhere at once. The more intimate view that “getting close” affords is no guarantor of “objectivity.” And, insofar, as the observer has actually become a participant, there can be effects on the behavior studied. (p. 195)

Spradley (1979) suggested that observers keep four separate sets of notes to increase reliability in studies that involve observation techniques: short notes made at the time, expanded notes made immediately after each field session, a fieldwork journal to record problems and ideas, and a consistent record of analysis and interpretation.

In addressing the problem of validity, Lindlof and Taylor (2002) suggested that validation can be achieved by evaluating multiple forms of evidence, such as triangulation and by cycling some of the accounts back through the participants (member checks). Validation in this study was achieved by using several forms of evidence (diaries, photographs, interviews, and observation) and through member checks.

**Analysis and Interpretation**

Lindlof and Taylor (2002) point to an analytical framework for making sense of qualitative materials: data management (retrieving and categorizing), data reduction (prioritizing and coding based on emerging interpretation schemes), and conceptual development (allowing multiple concepts and themes to emerge) (p. 211).

An ongoing conceptual analysis of the data took place throughout the research process. The researcher conducted observations during the interviews, transcribing field notes immediately after each observation. Emerging patterns of behavior and response were noted and compared with the existing data.

The researcher used a constant comparison method, which involves inspecting and comparing all data that arise during the collection. Using this technique, the researcher looked for repetitive response patterns and whether interview responses
correlate with other information sources (such as the media diaries and photographs of bedrooms). As Lindlof and Taylor (2002) indicated,

Two features of grounded theory (or the constant-comparative method, as it is also known), are important: (1) Theory is grounded in the relationships between data and the categories into which they are coded; and (2) Codes and categories are mutable until late in the project, because the researcher is still in the field and data from new experiences continue to alter the scope and terms of her or his analytic framework. (p. 218)

The researcher initially used an open coding process, opening up the data, where as many categories as possible were coded. Through comparison of responses, the researcher determined which categories to develop and where to place the information. This process identified themes that emerged throughout the data collection. The data was classified and organized into an organizational codebook. For example, all references to youth language, sexuality, or access were identified and coded as specific themes. The theoretical orientations of symbolic interactionism and semiotics will be foundational in “fleshing out the thematic qualities of the coding categories” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 220).

The researcher developed additional questions as the study progresses, building on the results of prior observations, interviews, media diaries, and room culture photographs. For example, one question that evolved was to ask respondents which symbols in each video they would remember. Warren (2001) pointed to the need that qualitative interviews maintain some flexibility during implementation, noting that the “interviewer must remain flexible and attentive to the variety of meanings that may emerge during the interview . . . being alert to developing meanings that may render previously designed questions irrelevant in light of the changing contexts of meaning” (p. 87).
In addition, the researcher explored the exceptions found in interviews. As indicated by Jankowski and Wester (1991), triangulation does not absolve researchers of interpretive work. When findings from different methods conflict, or even support each other, this signals the beginning of a phase of theoretical analysis examining the nature of agreements and disagreements (p. 68). For example, the pregnant girls provided a much different perspective about music videos than the girls who were not parents.

The working documents assisted the researcher in structuring axial coding, the next stage of the constant comparison method. In axial coding, the researcher integrates categories, resulting in either new categories or themes. This process of integration will change the nature of the categories from a collection of incidents into a more theoretical construct (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 222). In addition, the researcher implemented the process of dimensionalization, a final step in the process of coding, categorization and conceptual development. When noting dimensions, the researcher points out how the categories vary (or not), and can identify patterns within the data. One example is how participants viewed music starts as telling the “truth” about life, and the significance that message had to their own lives. As noted by Strauss and Corbin (1998), this process of coding is the foundation and beginning structure for theory building (p. 121). A cycle of reflection, observation, and analysis was repeated throughout the research process until theoretical saturation was signaled.

Lindlof and Taylor (2002) stated that the process of “interpretation involves the translation of an object of analysis from one frame of meaning into another” (p. 232). Interpretation operates in a mode of pattern recognition, as though the researcher is deciphering a code. This process of translation involves using theories or symbolic
relationships to understand data in a new way (Silverman, 2001). In addition, Lindlof and Taylor, (2002), noted that

Also of great importance in developing interpretations are exemplars. Also called incidents or episodes, an exemplar is part—or an amalgam of parts—of a project’s data that is shaped and used to advance an argument. Exemplars can take a variety of forms, ranging from a brief interview excerpt to a longer story which represents a rich vein of field experience. Exemplars are noted as the best evidence a researcher can present as the substructure for interpretive claims. They are central to the rhetorical achievements of a research text. (p. 234)

Jankowski and Wester (1991) suggested that it is during the writing up of qualitative research that the final analysis of the data takes place. They noted that there are generally three forms of qualitative reports:

1. descriptions which make little or no reference to theoretical perspectives;
2. analytical discussions based on concepts emerging from the study;
3. substantive accounts intended to contribute to general theory. (p. 69)

Theory plays a critical role in interpretation. Strauss and Corbin (1998) pointed to the importance of differentiating between description, conceptual ordering, and theorizing, noting that theory incorporates both forms of data analysis. As Strauss and Corbin (1998) noted “theorizing is the act of constructing from data an exploratory scheme that systematically integrates various concepts through statements of relationship” (p. 25). The process involves a data-driven design (theoretical sampling), where the key goal is the creation of new concepts from the data and the researcher can “construct theory grounded in data” (Morse & Richards, 2002, p. 54).
CHAPTER 4
FINDINGS

Despite the obstacles presented in Chapter 3, the researcher was well rewarded through gaining substantial information about how these young women view and use music videos to inform their lives. The interviewing experience was sometimes heart searing and always emotionally exacting. It became evident that the heartaches and emotional difficulties of these young women would become a variable in how the study developed and was presented.

The level of trust and willingness to participate in academic work appears relatively low in this population of at-risk adolescent girls. The researcher soon learned the importance of establishing emotional connections within each group, especially at the residential facilities. This was an extremely relevant aspect of the study that was not initially expected. The emotional ties developed with people at each organization provided a basis for trust that was necessary so that the in-depth interviews were successful interactions. In addition, each participant chose a pseudonym to retain anonymity. The girls could not be identified because they are minors. Results of the study address the following three research questions:

1. What do at-risk adolescent girls learn from watching music videos?
2. What are the specific nonverbal and verbal music video signs and symbols discussed by participants?
3. Does this population recognize a need for media literacy curriculum?
Research Question 1: What Do At-risk Adolescent Girls Learn from Watching Music Videos?

Key Themes

It appears that this group of at-risk adolescent girls does gain significant social and developmental information from music videos. Key themes that emerged through constant comparison and review of the data and subsequent notes are social text in forming identity and understanding the world, the language of youth culture, gender reactions, media’s impact, and prosocial messages. The definitions and dimensions of each theme are as follows:

Social Text and Identity Formation

Music videos provide verbal and nonverbal communication that informs, educates, and entertains this population. The videos provide a symbolic representation of reality about developmental issues and conflicts within teen culture. Participants indicated that they identify with and learn from the themes presented in music videos. Specific theme dimensions are learning behaviors and attitudes about sex and violence, trends in dance and fashion, storytelling techniques, and developing cultural identity and social rituals.

Sex. Thirteen-year-old Shantai showed an awareness of music industry standards that was reflected throughout the study, noting that “some videos have messages not really meant to be on TV but still they put them out to get money, to get rich, and most of the videos are about women getting harassed or about men touching women. That’s basically it.”

The OutKast video, “The Way You Move,” generated the most reaction from respondents regarding how women were depicted as sexual objects. Comments ranged
from “the women are like animals in the field” to “they look like slaves.” Two respondents indicated that the lyrics were slang for how a woman moves during sexual interactions.

In addition, many of the girls were progressively critical about the images when they watched the video without sound. They became more aware of the nonverbal messages being presented about women and sexuality. Carol, 16, noted “ain’t nobody look like that in real life. Ain’t nobody in real life gonna sit there and let ‘em roll on their leg with a rag, ‘specially of they don’t know you.” Diamond, 12, believed that the video “teaches, probably telling you to stay away from boys—that is what my mom would say. She would say that because she wouldn’t want a little boy telling me that he like the way I move.” Diamond also noted that adults would have varied reactions to her viewing the video, where

Some adults might get up and dance to the rhythm where as the others tell me I can’t watch it until I’m in like the 8th grade, because they gonna think that I am going to get the wrong idea out of this video and start hanging around with boys that are stinky, so. They probably won’t want me to watch it, then, they don’t know what might happen in my head—that’s how some people are.

Red, 17 and pregnant, was concerned about how women will mimic the physical norm for women’s bodies depicted in videos. She addressed how girls who are overweight will “be an anorexic because you have to look the way they do or some video that has sex in it—they tend to have sex.” And, Cath, 13, talked about how “they (videos) seem to be really targeting sexual things lately. They don’t seem to be talking about much of feelings . . . just think, ‘oh there’s a girl down the street. I’ll sleep with her because she is hot.’ Like that.”

**Violence.** Eight of the respondents discussed the violence in music videos and how music artists are irresponsible and promote violence to youth. For example, Pimp, 17, was critical of a specific artist and the impact his messages have on young people:
Like 50 Cent—I got shot nine times in the face with something, you know, or yet I’m still with it and I can go kill somebody and not get in trouble for it. I think the way that artists should think . . . ok, well, maybe these kids are watching videos and they don’t have their parents influence, you know, to sit there and explain to them right from wrong, so, hey, maybe I should be the person, since they look up to me, to be the right influence. But they don’t; they are just worried about making money.

Additional comments included Sunshine, 17, who stated that “music videos should cut all the violence and sexual stuff out—because it’s inappropriate for young people” and Dreux, 12, who noted that “some music videos that kids watch have a lot of violence in them . . . and they probably will take that as an inspiration to do something like that.”

The girls also discussed the violent scene between Beyoncé and her boyfriend in the "Me, Myself and I” video. In the scene, Beyoncé confronts her man about his sexual transgressions, angrily pushing and kicking him. Participants claimed that this was an unrealistic depiction, based on their knowledge of men’s behavior. For example, Rachel, 14, stated “the violence is not realistic. Boys would shake you—he wouldn’t hit you, but he would react” and Ramona, 17, said that “he would have hit her back, up and down.” Sunshine, 17, provided a different perception, laughing at the scene and stating, “He got caught. Dang, that’s a shame.”

**Dance.** Twenty-two of the 36 respondents of all ages indicated that they learned dance steps and routines from watching music videos. Renee, 17, provided a succinct summary of the overall perception: “You can learn dances because some people they don’t know how to dance and certain music videos can show them.” The younger girls (aged 11-14) also noted that their friends learn from videos and often mimic the dances. Both Dreux, 12, and Cierra, 14, wrote similar comments: “If they see the video they might wanna get two groups together and do like a dance competition.” Several of the
respondents discussed how they mimic the dances of certain artists. Specifically, Rita, 14, stated, “I’m a big fan of Beyoncé. She’s my girl. And, I do all her dances.” Six girls noted that they learned dance steps from Cierra’s “My Goodies,” which was a popular video in heavy rotation during the period of data collection.

**Fashion.** The girls reacted in a number of different ways to the fashions presented in music videos. Ten of the respondents indicated that they copied fashion or hairstyles from music video stars. Three participants were clear about “what a lot of the girls are wearing (in videos) disgraces women . . . the clothes you wear give you a reputation. . . . It’s too revealing and it kind of gives off the impression of easy and sleazy.”

**Storytelling.** Participants showed a relatively sophisticated knowledge of video production techniques. For example, 16 girls noted how the visual storyline in Beyoncé’s video ran backwards. Some girls thought the technique was “stupid,” while others thought it represented part of the story, “like she was rewinding and doing everything over again . . . like she was fixing her mistakes.”

Another element that became clear was that this population depended on music videos to clarify messages through visual depiction. Fourteen-year-old Rita noted that “the pictures . . . it’s like the pictures come to life. And, when they come to life they tell a story,” and Cath, 13, stated “sometimes people use words to substitute things and you don’t understand what they mean. So, when you see pictures you basically get what they are seeing.”

**Cultural identity.** In discussing the cultural roles of music, Renee, 17, pointed to how “music in general, like especially hip hop, is a certain way people live and it is not just in the music itself. It is in the way they dress, what we might eat, things we do.” In addition, Red, 17, believed her boyfriend’s behavior is directly attributable to music. She
stated, “What brings out the negativity in him is the music and the words that he watches. I think he is very rude toward people because this is how they (video stars) are.” Red also claimed that there was tremendous peer pressure to conform and listen to certain types of music in order to be accepted into a group. As she said, “you can’t be different. You all got to be the same.”

**Social ritual.** The girls noted a variety of reasons for watching music videos that indicated the process was ritualistic, although not necessarily goal-oriented. Fifteen of the girls said they turned on the music channels because they were bored and “there is nothing else to watch, and everyone else is watching.” A number of personal interests were also cited. Whitney, 12, watched them as a hobby, Renee, 17, wanted to see how a new artist looked, Pecan Rican, 18, claimed a love of music, and Baby, 17, watched to learn dance moves. In addition, Spanky, 17 and pregnant, stated “that’s what I grew up with . . . I’ve watched them forever . . . my parents, they don’t want me to watch it because they don’t want my baby to grow up listening to the same things.”

**Language of Youth Culture**

Youth culture is represented through the multi-sensory symbolic syntax of music. Participants discussed how music videos affected their perceptions, reinforced their worldview, or provided additional knowledge. Specific dimensions include lyrics, the beat of music, how visuals impact meaning, and the evolution of cultural verbal meanings (i.e., slang).

**Lyrics.** Twelve of the respondents discussed how song lyrics impact the attitudes of young people, with both positive and negative outcomes. When discussing their own reactions, girls referred to the emotional impact of music. For example, Pooh Bear, 18 and pregnant, talked about how “words hit me right in the heart because they explain,
like you can see every heartbreak you ever had.” When referring to the Beyoncé video “Me, Myself and I,” Kelly, age 11, noted how “words tell it best because it’s a story. It’s better because she sang it as a story. You can’t really picture it.”

Dreux, 12, noted how her friends would ignore the visuals and pay attention only to the lyrics, “because they probably won’t look at the meaning of the video, they’ll probably just like to be in the words.” Girls were also critical of today’s lyrics, as evidenced by 17-year-old Pimp’s statement “and, that is another thing—lyrics to songs—a lot of kids pick up on their words and it doesn’t matter what it is . . . they will say it and that’s how . . . like I have noticed that a lot of people are really disrespectful to teachers right now.”

**Beat.** The affective power of music, where the beat is recognized as being most important, is an intriguing part of the data. Eighteen of the girls claimed that they did not really watch the videos, but paid more attention to the beat of a song. For example, Scrappy, 18, commented that she and her friends talk about “the dance, we focus on the words, the beats,” Baby, 17, noted how she turns on the TV and “just listens to the music,” while Red, 17, said “I would only listen for the beat . . . I wouldn’t listen to it for influence because of the words and visual effect.” Smooches, 14, explained further, stating how she and friends “don’t pay attention to all that type of stuff . . . like what the words mean and the pictures . . . we are paying attention to the beat of the song in the video.”

**How visuals impact meaning.** As already noted, 18 girls claimed that they didn’t attend to the visuals in music videos, that they paid more attention to the lyrics and beat of a song. For example, Susan, 17, stated “you can’t learn from the videos. You can learn from the lyrics, but you can’t learn anything from the videos . . . they are just for
entertainment purposes to go along with the music”; and Spanky, 17, noted “I hear it on the radio . . . the video has nothing to add.”

However, despite their claims of ignoring the visuals, 22 participants stated that they learned dance steps and fashion from watching videos. In addition, 15 girls also noted several juxtapositions between the meanings of the lyrics and visuals presented in the Beyoncé video. As Shantai, 13, pointed out,

Like when she was in the tub doing things . . . that she really want him back but her words were saying that she don’t but her movement . . . I thought that maybe she just popped those words up out of her mouth knowing that she do want him back.

**Evolution of cultural verbal meanings.** Pecan Rican, 18 and pregnant, was quick to criticize how music is promoting negative attitudes in young people, stating,

We are sick of the new music the way it is, you know, more for the younger kids that are like in middle school and stuff and they are the ones that are all up into this new stuff because they don’t know anything any better.

She went on to note how the language in music videos is degrading and doesn’t really talk about issues:

It is getting worse because everything is just big cars, big rings, big this, big that, I’m with this “ho,” I’m with that “ho” whatever. You’re a “ho,” she’s a “ho.” Freak a leak. You know, I am just getting tired of hearing that.

In addition, Pooh Bear and Pecan Rican clearly understand the generation gap between today’s youth culture slang and adult interpretations of the language. Pooh Bear, 18 and pregnant, noted “I don’t think parents can understand what they are saying. I think they lack in the innuendo department.” Pecan Rican talked about how adults need to recognize the needs of young people and pay attention to their culture. She stated,

Today, you need to know everything about the language. You know everything about the slang. You need to know everything so that you can talk to them. You want to make it to where they will come to you before they will go to their friends.
And, as Pecan noted, adults can misinterpret lyrics, which may further alienate their children. When asked how adults would react to Missy Elliott’s “I’m So Hot” video, Pecan responded,

Most adults probably wouldn’t get it because today the way we use language or explain, I mean when ya’ll hear it ya’ll might think we are talking about something real crazy … it is just a different way of talking. It is like our own little language.

She also pointed out how

They (adults) would probably think that it was sexual because they don’t understand our language, you know, she is telling them “I’m really hot” and just because you say you are hot or this/that it doesn’t mean that that is what you are talking about, it means something else . . . you got confidence in yourself but it doesn’t mean all sexual.

**Gender Relations**

Music videos develop and reinforce expectations and stereotypes about men and women. Girls learn stereotypes and are reinforced in their assumptions about how men and women socially interact, especially regarding sexual relationships. Dimensions include roles and behaviors of men and women, and assumptions about attitudes and reactions of boys to the sexual content of music videos.

**Roles and behaviors of men**

It appears that this population stereotypes the behaviors of men when discussing relationships between men and women. Twenty-six of the 36 participants made negative comments about how men treat women. These responses were usually generated in reaction to the storylines depicted in the OutKast and Beyoncé videos. In the OutKast video, women are depicted as sexual objects. In the Beyoncé video, she finds evidence that he has sexually cheated.
Twelve of the respondents indicated that men cannot be trusted to be sexually monogamous. Red, 17 and pregnant, stated “they (guys) don’t have emotions, you know, I think. Girls have a lot more emotions and take it a lot harder . . . I can’t trust anybody,” and Kelly, 11, discussed how Beyoncé is “saying that she’s by herself now—because you can’t trust anyone.” Sunshine, 17, expressed “never get in a relationship, and think that person isn’t going to cheat.” Rita, 14, said “I think about men . . . you can’t really trust ‘em,” and Susan, 17 and pregnant, believed “don’t depend on guys because they will always cheat on you. Always, no matter what they say.” However, Pimp, 17, disagreed with these perceptions, stating that “not all guys are bad and they won’t cheat and everything . . . it is not always like that.”

When referring to the OutKast video, several girls were quick to say that the video gave them information about men’s perceptions. For example, Tiara, 14 said, it “teaches you how men think about women.” And Allie, 16, stated that “boys would like it because there are half-naked women in it.”

**Roles and behaviors of women**

Although most respondents claimed they only learned dance steps from music videos, some believed they also learned “what guys like and dislike about females.” Participants also reacted to the stereotypes presented in the OutKast video. Examples of how girls perceived the presentation of women’s roles in this video include 12-year-old Dreux’s perception that the artists were “trying to say that, um, they probably like women who can work or who can like serve them and such.” Smooches, 14, and two other girls thought that the women were “acting like they were animals, basically because they were like prey.” And Carol, 17, noted “that’s the way people expect you to look, but
. . . people don’t look like that! Not everybody has big breasts and big booties.” Ten respondents also noted how the men wore several layers of clothing in the OutKast video, while women were in bikinis and cocktail dresses. Baby, 16, provided a summary quote for how participants viewed this aspect, “I just don’t see why the guys are allowed to wear long sleeves and pants and the girls are in swimsuits.”

Participants discussed how girls are forming expectations about body image, gender relations, and sexuality based on the visuals in music videos. For example, Pimp, 17, stated “a lot of girls think that what you wear makes you beautiful and that’s what music videos teach them.” Seventeen-year-olds MOA and Red, along with Katie, 15, and Rita, 14, all point to how women are depicted as “beautiful, skinny and half naked” in videos, which promotes the belief that “all it takes to be on these videos is to show your body,” a difficult concept for young women to accept. As Katie, 15, said, “they just be in the videos because they are pretty . . . we get mad because we cute; we can dance. We be like ‘turn that mess off.’ I don’t want to see it no more.”

When referring to the behaviors in the OutKast video, Baby, 16, said, “a lot of guys get the impression from music videos that girls are like objects.” And Pimp, 17, said it “gave the wrong images as far as how guys treat females . . . that just gives teenagers the impression ‘yea, that’s the way it’s supposed to be’, and that’s not right.” Baby, 16, added her concerns, stating that “some girls are just growing up thinking that it’s ok for people to treat you like that—it’s wrong.”

Rose, 17 and pregnant, was very critical of music videos, noting that

Music videos are disgusting. I hate the way . . . no matter who it is, they always think women dress nasty not sexy. I mean, I guess it’s good for guys or whatever. I just think that music videos are very sexist because they are just nasty.
Shakayla, 11, expressed concern about what girls are learning, saying, “they carried themselves, it is just how they dancing and shaking; it’s like, they ain’t hoochies. They just doing it for the money, but still it’s presenting the kids to go out and be like that.”

**Assumptions about male reactions to music videos**

Participants thought that boys learned everything from “dance” (W7) to “how to catch women” (AA5) from watching music videos. Girls had some interesting comments about how boys are developing perceptions about women, based on the images presented in music videos. For example, Britnee, 17, noted,

> Boys are seeing these videos of half-naked women . . . they are expecting more out of girls. And, they think if you don’t look like these women, ain’t got the big boobies—‘you ain’t my type.’ They learnin’ this from music videos.

Shakayla, 11, believed that music videos “persuade boys to do … well, bad things. Like to be all up on girls and stuff” (N10), while Spanky, 17, thought that “boys learn to stereotype and label women.”

Participants also thought that boys would react negatively to the message presented in the Beyoncé video, although women would relate to it. For example, Smooches, 14, said, “guys, they would probably think ‘pathetic;’ but chicks, they would probably do the same thing (as Beyoncé),” and MOA, 17 and pregnant, thought “the men would probably see it as a bad thing and the women probably relate to it.”

In the diaries, 30 participants observed that music videos provide a degrading and unrealistic depiction of women’s bodies, and that men respond sexually to these visuals. For example, as Julie, 17, wrote, “the video was nasty. You can tell it’s a guy video with girls butt cheeks hanging out for no reason. Gross.” Susan, 17, added to this perception, noting that “women betray themselves” through their actions and that she did not understand “why her brothers see these ladys as sexy.”
Impact of Media

Participants expressed concerns about the impact of music video content and production techniques on young children. They see the videos as tools that teach young people how to interact socially, with primarily negative consequences. Dimensions for this theme are age appropriate access, mimicry and modeling, and inappropriate content.

Age appropriate access

Fifteen of the 36 participants believed there should be restricted access and/or age limits for young people to watch videos. For example, Baby, 16 and the mother of two children, pointed out how television is “the electronic babysitter. Some people just sit there and let them watch whatever. I wouldn’t let my kids watch music videos ‘til they got to a certain age because . . . this country is really influenced by TV.” And Pooh Bear, 18 and pregnant, commented on how she may let her daughter view,

Certain ones. I do believe certain ones—like I said, the ones that talk about real stuff; and, if the video fits what they are talking about—yes; but if it is just sexual and just ignorant then no. She doesn’t need to know about drugs from the TV; that is what she has a mother for. She doesn’t need to know how they sell it or where they package it and crap like that and she doesn’t need to know that she has to dress like a little whore to be cute. She needs to be a respectable woman—that’s what I think; a God fearing woman.

And Renee, 17, believed that the messages in most media may have a negative effect on young viewers.

If it got a negative effect on them then maybe they shouldn’t; but if it did not affect them, I don’t see nothing wrong with it. Some of it is garbage; but it is not just videos, it is everything, movies and all that other stuff so it really don’t matter.

Specific age limits for viewing music videos posited by eight participants ranged from 11 to 14 years of age. The differences in opinion appeared to depend primarily on their own ages. Shantai, 13, stated that “the age that I think would be responsible is 13 or
older because they are teenagers and they are ready to learn,” while her sister, Shakayla, 11, “agreed with age 11 and older.” Two 12-year-olds, Shadae and Dreux, discuss how there should be age limits for watching videos and that they are both too young to watch some of them. Dreux said, “you should at least start when you are about a teenager, like 13 almost,” and Shadae thought children should be “14 on up, because kids learn from music videos.” Carol, 16, thought that “kids under the age of 14 should not watch them . . . because they’re just too small—and it would set a bad example. They’ll grow up and be juvenile delinquents like me.” And, Rose, 17 and pregnant, believed that “music videos should not be watched ever by anyone at any age.” Pecan Rican, 18 and pregnant, took a more practical view of how to handle the issue:

> When he starts getting to the age when he starts asking me questions, then I’m not going to try to stop him from it because whether you stop or not they are still going to be going to school, they are still going to be around their friends, they are going to be around somebody who, it could even be a babysitter who you could think is the most perfect babysitter but she might be listening to it. So, it is better to go ahead and prepare them. They always go to their friends for advice and friends their age aren’t the best people to get advice from. You know, like, when I was younger friends my age weren’t the people to get advice from but seeing as my mom, you know, she wasn’t really on to this stuff, you can’t go to her and ask.

**Inappropriate content**

In the diaries, Diamond, Baby, Denise, Dreux, Shakayla, and Spanky all wrote about how specific music videos can impact young people, from learning how to dance and sing to getting “krunked (high) with it.” In addition, these girls thought the videos they viewed were “sad and sexy,” “not good for young children,” and that “they need to stop putting sex in the videos.”

During her interview, Pooh Bear, 18 and pregnant, comments that she “thinks they should save the booty ones for late night TV when the parents are up and the kids
are in bed.” In support of this perception, Shantai, 13, said that she believed kids are influenced by the “body language” in videos. Red, 17 and pregnant, also noted how inappropriate content can “influence the generation, but I don’t really see what we could do.” Rose, 17 and pregnant, thought that the content in music videos is “all disgusting and my child is going to be raised better than that. I think rap has just gone to crap. They talk about drugs and sex and naked women all the time, and I don’t think that children should listen to it.”

**Mimicry/modeling**

Fourteen participants believed that children mimic the role models they see in music videos. For example, Rose, 17 and pregnant, commented, “kids copy from everyday life and everything they see and everything they hear—they copy it.” Susan, 17 and pregnant, noted that “you have to let them know that it is just entertainment . . . and nothing to learn from. You can watch it. You can dance to it. But, don’t try to do what you see.” And, Spanky, 17 and pregnant, believed that

Little kids don’t know no better . . . like 13 or 14 year olds. They are like “oh, if they can do it, I can too,” cuz I know I did it when I was 13 or 14. I watched music videos and I would think that if they can do it, I can too.

Other respondents gave specific examples, ranging from mimicking fashions, dances, and sexual actions to learning violent behaviors. As Cath, 13, stated, “they will see a video and if they are having problems they will think that ‘oh, killing is cool,’ and if I kill someone I will be in the in-crowd. So they go out and kill somebody and get themselves arrested.”

Additional concerns mentioned by participants included how the videos present information to young people about swearing, drinking, smoking, being in jail, fighting, and self-mutilation. Specifically, Smooches discussed how she thought “on certain videos they show people cutting themselves so they probably would start doing that or
smoking and all that stuff they show.” And Sunshine, 17, commented on how “the children watching videos, 5- and 6-year-olds—you B_I_T_C_H. And you’re like—what? Yeah, that’s where they get all that stuff from. And that’s why it’s a bad influence on young people.” Rita, 14, noted how

It’s fighting words, how they be saying what they be saying . . . like certain people be making certain beats and getting them into their head . . . and like they think that they can do it. So they grow up doing it and they get, you know, messed up.

Prosocial Impact

Some music videos provide modeling information that depicts realistic life situations and methods for problem solving, such as the Beyoncé “Me, Myself and I” video. Specific dimensions are symbolic modeling for real life scenarios, problem solving, truth told about reality, and gratifying identification with music messages.

Symbolic modeling for real life scenarios

Perceptions of how music videos model prosocial behaviors ranged from how kids could learn dance steps to how to manage relationships. As Diamond, 12, noted “some kids could learn steps and cheers. Some people put their dances in their own way, sometimes a video can be a good teacher.” Katie, 15, talked about how some videos show “real true life stuff that actually goes on: ‘Like Nelly’s ‘My Place’ video. That happens in real life.’” She also stated how kids learn from music videos, but that “everybody knows a video is fake, but for some people is it learning. They be like ‘I want to be just like that,’ but they don’t know.” In an atypical interpretation, Scrappy, 17, talked about how the OutKast video taught her that “you don’t have to really move in order to get a boy. You could talk to them instead of moving, dancing all the time.”

Dreux, 12, Carol, 16, and Smooches, 14, pointed out how they learned to “just move on,” and “that you should fix it yourself,” and “get it, girl . . . you don’t really need
no man. All you need is yourself’’ from watching how Beyoncé dealt with a philandering male. Respondents liked this video because it taught them to ‘‘keep going no matter what’’ and that ‘‘it is teaching you something about relationships and what happens.’’ As Rita stated, ‘‘Beyoncé, that’s my girl. She talk about a lot of the things she goes through. And, it’s like . . . some of the same things I go through. Some men, I’m not saying all men . . . some men is just dirt.’’ Twelve respondents noted the importance of Missy Elliott as a role model. Girls were supportive of her attitudes about how to live. For example, Dreux, 12, stated ‘‘she doesn’t try to impress anyone or she doesn’t try to wear outfits that people already like, she just wears comfortable outfits.’’ Pooh Bear, 18, comments on how Missy Elliott

Inspires me so much to do the best I can . . . there are no other female artists that can compare to her. She is at the top of her game . . . I am so proud to be a black woman because of her because she isn’t singing about her boobies and her little butt.

Diamond, 12, noted how Missy Elliott is an atypical role model for young black women, stating ‘‘some kids might think more positive about themselves because they seeing someone else is ‘just like me.’ They might stop being ashamed of singing and dancing for other people.’’ Rita pointed out how Missy Elliott has impacted her and her younger brother, how ‘‘I learned from her music, because some of her music is true. Missy, she kinda like a big influence. My brother always plays her video . . . she inspires him.’’

Problem solving

Six of the respondents discussed how music videos can help them solve problems, sometimes just by listening to the music. Pimp, 17, was very specific about this, denoting how she used music to deal with her negative feelings about life.

But, hell, music is a main part of everybody’s life, I think because it either helps you get through something or not. When I was really mad and had to get my
anger out, I would listen to rap music that I hated and it would just help to get my
anger out . . . when I start holding things in and not talking to anybody I just went
berserk, you know, so I listened to some music that I didn’t like too much and it
talked really, really bad.

Rita, 14, talked about how she developed a positive attitude from watching music
videos, and she learned “if you want anything in life you can get it and you can do it.
Music videos give me a lot of confidence . . . power and strength . . . it helps me guide
my life.” MOA, 17, talked about how music videos can promote people understanding
each other, stating “you can learn different people’s perspectives on things; how they see
things. How people act in their world.” Dreux, 12, commented on how gospel videos help
her with life, and that she “learns like even if you do something wrong you can talk to
God and you can pray or something and everything will get better.”

In addition, the Beyonce video provided information about how to deal with a bad
situation. Both Pecan Rican, 18, and Shantai, 13, note that Beyoncé learned to be closer
with herself and that “she don’t need no men or nobody . . . she is going to succeed in
life.”

**Truth told about reality**

Nine girls talked about how some music stars are important to them because they
represent the “truthful reality” of the girls’ lives. The respondents cited a number of
examples, ranging from Usher, a ballad singer, to Eminem, a controversial rap star.
Interestingly, Eminem was mentioned by four participants as someone who really told
the truth, reflecting their experiences as young Americans. As Spanky, 17, noted “he is
my favorite rapper just because it’s the truth. It is exactly the truth. I can compare his life
with mine and they are not wanting to accept that parents actually do this.” In addition,
three respondents talked about how Usher “tells the truth” about his life, and how “he
shows a man’s point of view.”
Cath, 13, and Scrappy, 17, talked about the positive lesson in the Beyoncé video, discussing how “she tells things that are probably true,” and “she is expressing her true feelings” because “she could be by herself instead of with a man like that.”

Respondents also discussed how they learn from music videos that “talk about real stuff . . . about what is going on in your community,” and those that “speak the truth because that’s the way it is right now in High School.”

**Identification with messages in music**

In the diaries, girls were self-referential about some of the stories told by the videos, noting the affective aspect of music’s role in their lives. For example, 17-year-olds Pimp and Renee both noted how they can “relate” to a video, and Smooches, 14, wrote that “I couldn’t really understand it, but I like the beats to it and it calms me down.”

In the interview, Spanky, 17, discussed how, when she’s upset, music will help her get into a better mood, and noted that “music plays a big part in people’s lives, especially today . . . like there are certain songs that you can listen to and you will think maybe this is something that I want to do.” And, Baby, 17, noted, in reference to the Beyoncé video, that the lesson is “don’t be so naïve (about men).” Pimp, 17, when responding to the Beyoncé video, said,

> I think that’s a really good song and it portrays a good message. I think that it is like . . . like artists nowadays should like send the right message instead of wrong then everything would be ok, you know, and there might not be as much crime in the world right now because they do talk about killing people and stuff like that, you know, and that’s the wrong thing to do.

Pimp’s response reflects how 15 respondents felt about this video, because it speaks to some of their own experiences. Several of the girls referenced how they related to the lyrics. For example, Scrappy, 17, said “well, Beyoncé’s video touched me because
I been through the situation that she been through before,” and Katie, 15, thought the song resonated with women because “it shows them that they are not the only person going through it.” Smooches, 14, clarified its importance to her, stating that “I like that video because I am going through it right now, and it teaches me to be independent. I have to take care of myself—and just not worry about anything else.” Twelve-year-old Dreux discussed how the video was “inspirational for me because if that situation would happen to me, I might remember this video and what she did . . . I might can do the same thing.”

Other ways that participants responded to music messages include 14-year-old Rita’s comment that she “loves hip-hop a lot because it let me learn a lot of things. I like to explore music a lot too. It helps me ease my mind.” In addition, Dreux talked about how the “best videos are where you just be yourself and you don’t dress to flash or anything. You just be yourself, you have fun making the video and you don’t do it as a serious thing or to be noticed.”

**Research Question 2: What Are the Specific Nonverbal and Verbal Music Video Signs and Symbols Discussed by Participants?**

In answering this research question, each music video will be addressed separately because of the specific reactions from participants. The videos were shown in the following sequence and will be analyzed in the same order:

1. Artist: OutKast  
   Song: *The Way You Move*  
   Album: Speakerboxxx/The Love Below

2. Artist: Beyoncé Knowles  
   Song: *Me, Myself, and I*  
   Album: Dangerously in Love

3. Artist: Missy Elliott  
   Song: *I’m Really Hot*  
   Album: This is Not a Test
OutKast Video: The Way You Move

When viewing the OutKast video, The Way You Move, 20 participants expressed discomfort with how women were portrayed sexually. The most prevalent view was that “men controlled the women . . . (evident through) body language.” The symbolic representations of sexuality noted by six participants were how the women were being presented as “slaves,” who were “like animals in the field” “being spied on by a man.” Six focus group participants discussed how the video “teaches you how men think about women. . . and “that’s how men would like their women . . . how they want you to treat them like kings.” Additional comments ranged from how the video was about “dancing, the girls fanny, and working on cars” to how the video “isn’t for children because it is saying that girls are ‘hoochies.’”

When asked what they would remember most about the video, 16 girls mentioned the “naked or half-naked women.” Participants expressed concern that this video is “not influencing the girls the right way. It is saying that girls are easy, which we are not.” Seventeen-year-olds Sunshine and Red agreed that “it is an inappropriate video for someone her age or younger to watch because of the partially naked women.” Pimp, 17, provided a succinct comment about how the video degraded personal relationships, “it makes it kinda seem like women and men aren’t actually meant to have a good relationship; it’s just about who can get who.”

Three participants noticed more specific sexual visuals when the video played without sound. MOA, 17, noted how “without the words it looks like they are just watching the women,” and Pecan Rican, 18, commented how “without the music, it makes it look like it’s ok for a man to have as many women as he wants at the same time,
which is not morally right.” She also went on to note how, with the music, “it just looks like everybody is having fun.”

Respondents indicated that the lyrics were self-explanatory, that “they like the way we move,” was clearly the message. Despite participant discomfort with the sexuality of the visuals, the lyrics generated minimal discussion, as a majority of the girls felt “there was nothing wrong with ‘em.”

Additional signs and symbols noted by participants included sets and costuming, such as the unrealistic initial opening scene where women are in bikinis working on cars; the black and white formal costumes where the cast is dancing in a ballroom, and what four girls referred to as the ‘Star Wars’ fight scene, where the two male singers are play fighting with laser beams.

All of the participants were familiar with the music of OutKast. Fifteen of the girls had been following the group’s career, and five respondents knew the musical history of OutKast, referring to their beginnings in high school and subsequent financial success as rap stars.

**Beyoncé Video: Me, Myself and I**

All of the respondents felt that this was a realistic video that provided an important message to women about relationships. Participants were quick to see the storyline, and Diamond, 12, provided a quote that summarized the general perceptions: “she finds underwear, they get into a fight, and she breaks up with him.”

The girls responded to the signs and symbols in this video that reflected their lives and spoke to their experiential knowledge of men and boys. The primary symbols that were commented on were Beyoncé’s clothing and hairstyles, the fight with her man, crying in the bath tub and cutting her hair in response to the break up with her boyfriend.
These symbols were interpreted in a variety of ways. Fifteen of the girls talked about the four outfits, three hairstyles, and jewelry she exhibited during the video. A primary focus of several participants was on one scene “when she’s pulling up her pants.” Girls also talked about whether they liked or would wear the clothes. Cath, 13, noted how the clothing did not reflect the lyrics, “She was saying that all she needed was her—me, myself and I. And the director thought otherwise; he was showing her wearing not exactly appropriate clothes.”

When discussing the violent scene between Beyoncé and the man, 10 girls noted that she was “mad” and “they got into a fight or argument,” because she found “panties.” Most of the 10 girls felt she was justified, although three thought this scene was unrealistic (that he would have hit or shaken her). Rita, 14, noted that “it was kinda wrong the way she kicked him. Go, Beyoncé, girl.”

Eight of the girls discussed how she cuts her hair. The scene generated a number of comments, ranging from how she “was changing her appearance because this guy has done her wrong” and “I guess it’s a whole change,” to how some girls “cut their arms” when something like this happens to them. The bathtub scene generated a mixed response from participants. One indicated that she was “cleansing herself of the man,” while three others thought it was inappropriate to show her bathing, that she “should have hid that part.”

In addition, five participants discussed the production technique of rewinding the story, with a variety of responses. Katie, 15, thought that “she was going back and seeing . . . she was going back saying ‘well, all of the stuff he did. . . .’” Dreux, 12, commented that “she was rewinding and doing everything over again, it looked like she was fixing her mistakes.”
Probably the most interesting result of this discussion was how 15 participants in all age groups noted the juxtaposition between the lyrics and visuals in this video. Respondents felt that she was singing about being independent, but that her actions and clothing indicated otherwise. As Shantai, 13, said, “her movement was saying come back, come back, but her words wasn’t.” Five participants noted how she was “crawling on the floor,” and three commented on how she was “humping the couch.” One noted how “if you are crawling on the floor over a sad song like this you should be crying, not looking like you’re about to hump the couch.” Pecan Rican, 18, said,

> It’s a really good song. It teaches you that you should rely on yourself and everything like that. And, it’s OK to dress sexy or . . . in a way that makes you feel good about yourself. But when you’re . . . climbing all over the furniture in too much of a sexy way . . . it makes you look slutty. I mean, younger kids are the main people that watch these videos . . . so if a young girl wants to be like Beyoncé, she might start acting like that.

Additional symbols noted by participants are how Beyoncé expresses her feelings because she “wags her head a lot here . . . showing attitude,” and three girls talked about when she is smoking a cigar, “probably to relieve tension.” There was also discussion about how men are responsive to Beyoncé’s beauty, even though, as Susan, 17, said “she has ugly hairdos.”

All of the participants were familiar with Beyoncé’s music, although not all of them enjoyed it. Respondents were primarily interested in discussing Beyoncé’s former group, Destiny’s Child, and how they planned to reunite (which has since manifested).

**Missy Elliott Video: I’m Really Hot**

This video gained the most diverse reactions from participants, with comments ranging from “this is just a dance video” to how it was a staged “dance off with violence.” The video generated a number of comments about symbols, perhaps because it
was rich in symbolic set construction. For example, six of the girls discussed the Asian symbols, calling them Chinese or Japanese or just oriental. Three girls also discussed the costuming and make-up (face painting) as interesting parts of the video. Two participants talked about how the costumes indicated that “you can have fun with your clothes on.” Three of the girls talked about how the set reminded them of the movie “The Matrix” because it was dark, people were “fighting in the air,” and there were a lot of flashing lights. In addition, ten of the girls talked about Missy Elliott’s use of children in her videos, noting how “she gives kids a chance to express themselves.”

When discussing what they would remember most, a majority of girls talked about the “dance off,” which they thought was represented by the black and white costumes, aggressive dance moves, sets, and lighting in the video. One participant noted that the set “reminds me of a drug deal the way they have it all set up with crates and stuff.” Missy Elliott’s lyrics were difficult for most to understand, although participants basically understood that she thinks she’s hot as a performer, not sexually hot.

Ten girls discussed how Missy Elliott has recently changed her looks, losing a lot of weight. However, the girls thought that she did it for health reasons. They did not think that she has tried to become better looking to help her career as a performer. The respondents discussed how they believed that she is not pandering to the “sexually packaged” female stereotype because she still wears baggy clothes and “does not leave her ‘stuff’ hanging out.”

**Research Question 3: Does this Population Recognize a Need for Media Literacy Curriculum?**

Participants expressed concerns about the impact of music video content and production techniques on boys and young children. Twenty-four of the girls saw the
videos as tools that teach young people how to socially interact, with positive and negative consequences. As Pimp, 17, noted,

A lot of music, like that talks good about getting over something, you know, that has helped me to become a stronger person because I have been through hell in my life and I am only 17.

Smooches, 14, provided a different perspective, stating “on certain videos they show them cutting themselves so they probably would start doing that or smoking and all that stuff they show.”

Red, 17 and pregnant, thought the Missy Elliott video “will really influence the young ones because there aren’t elderly people dancing in this—they are all underage.” And Shadae, 12, thought “kids learn moves and how they want to grow up to be like people . . . like if they want to rap.”

Six girls also stated that children “should be able to watch what they want,” without any age limits or other parameters. But, three of the younger girls, aged 11 to 13, expressed concern that children younger than 13-years old had access to music videos. As Shantai, 13, noted, “if I was younger I probably would think the age limit should be 13 because of the body language.”

Interestingly, when asked if they learned anything from music videos, both Katie, 15, and Carol, 16, were evasive. Katie, 15, said she learned, “nothing . . . some stuff you shouldn’t do.” Carol, 16, laughed and claimed she learned “how to be a bad-ass.”

Eight of the nine young parents thought it was important to teach children how media promotes certain attitudes, specifically because of peer pressure to embark on rebellious risk-taking behaviors. They were very vocal about the significance of parental intervention and involvement, noting that parents should communicate with their children about the content and production of media. As Baby, 16 and the mother of two children, said,
My little girl . . . I wouldn’t want her to be shopping and she wants those little tiny skimpy outfits because she saw some girl on a music video and she wants it. And, with my son, I don’t want him to think that women are just objects that you can treat any way—because that’s how they were on the video.

Pecan Rican, 18 and pregnant, noted the importance of communication between parents and children about media use, stating, “if you try to keep your child from it, they are not going to come to you for other things, and, you know, coming to you for other things is more important than keeping them from watching music videos.”

Spanky, 17 and pregnant, said,

If you teach them that the things that are in the video aren’t necessarily good, but you allow them to watch it and know that it is there in society and they are confronted with it, they don’t have to be scared about it because they know about it. But, if you tell them “do not watch it, you cannot watch that channel,” they are going to do it anyway, and then you can’t talk to them about it or what they think . . . you can’t ask them how they felt about it because you told them not to watch it. I think that they should be allowed to watch so long as you are monitoring what they are doing and talk to them about it.

A majority of the respondents in all age groups felt a need for media education, although they did not refer to it as such. When asked if she would let her children watch music videos, Smooches, 14, said, “I would have to talk with them about everything that went on, like what they do is this . . . don’t do it . . . and, you know, all that type of stuff.”

And, Red, 17 and pregnant, was concerned about restricting the access her child will have to music videos. As she stated,

It’s going to be hard, especially living in a home with her father being the way he is. I think it is going to be a little hard to keep her away from that type of music . . . because that’s what influences them.

Participants also discussed how TV isn’t reality, and that it depicts unrealistic behaviors without showing real life consequences of improper social interactions (i.e., violence, early sexual behaviors, and drug use). As Pimp, 17, pointed out,
A lot of kids started doing drugs because most rappers talk about it, you know, and brag about it or make it seem so cool. . . . I don’t think all videos are bad, but the ones that are just coming out . . . they send the wrong message.

And although Spanky, 17 and pregnant, claimed that she doesn’t learn anything anymore from music videos, she said,

Maybe if you were asking someone younger than me they would probably say yeah, because it’s like, you look at their fashions on the videos and then those girls go “well, I am going to dress like that.” Or, if they are drinking Hennessy, then they will be like “oh, well, let’s go.” Or, you know, like Akon, the song that he comes out with, he gets locked up because he sold weed . . . I mean, little kids like 12, 13, 14, 15, they look at it and they will be like “oh, well, you know.” They learn stuff that they do, and they do it and then they get in trouble.

In addition, a majority of participants felt that women were depicted unrealistically as sexual objects. Pecan Rican, 18 and pregnant, was quite concerned about young girls mimicking the behaviors of music stars. When discussing Beyoncé’s song *I’m Your Naughty Girl*, Pecan noted,

And now you have all these little kids singing it, and I just don’t like it. In my neighborhood all the other girls look up to me . . . they come to me before they go to their parents. I gave them my own little sexual education class and talked to their parents about them listening to the music. And, the kids (middle school girls) acted better; they weren’t having sex too much.

And Katie, 15, expressed concern about sexual content in videos, stating,

Some videos people shouldn’t do. Like, some videos that you see, ok every five seconds you see a girl dancing . . . and, I am not talking about dance routine, I am talking about shaking her behind like she at a strip bar; even we know that’s what sells and that’s what makes the video number one is the girl moving . . .

It appears that these participants saw media as a pertinent information source for youth in today’s society. It also appears, however, that the third-person effect was evident in their responses. Over 20 participants thought that the information in videos had stronger effects on other people. When referring to themselves, 22 girls felt they learned only dances, lyrics, hairstyles and fashion. Some of the same respondents were
quick to note that boys and younger children learned a variety of negative behaviors and attitudes from watching music videos. In the six-person focus group, participants agreed that boys learn “how to catch women,” and “what to look at.” They also noted that children may be “influenced to do the wrong thing,” and “learn to curse” by watching music videos, but did not think there should be an age limit.

Twenty-six respondents also felt that young children definitely form identity through watching music videos and other forms of television entertainment. Rita, 14, gave an interesting response to the OutKast video, indicating how these images may impact young women,

It was pretty good, but when they showed the ladies naked, with the bikinis on, I didn’t think that was appropriate. It’s not—people my age, 14 and up, they look on videos and they see these models. And they think that’s cute, and that’s all it takes to be on these videos is to show your body. It’s just too much for them and everything.

And Sunshine, 17, responded to the OutKast video with the following statement,

Little boys and girls shouldn’t be allowed to watch this kind of video . . . because of the naked females. Now me, I’m old enough and mature enough to watch it, because you won’t catch me doing the same thing. But, I might take some of the dances and stuff like that.

MOA, 17 and pregnant, talked about how girls and boys mimic the behaviors they see on television, such as “the way they dress, and do their hair and some people try to sing and dance like them too.” When referring to the OutKast video, Shantai, 13, talked about how she didn’t like “how the girls was letting men touch them because it’s like . . . it’s not influencing girls the right way. It is saying that girls are easy, which we are not.”

Twenty-six girls felt that boys learned stereotypical ways of looking at and treating women, thereby expecting women to be more sexually available and to wear skimpy clothing in order to attract men. For example, Baby, 16, talked about how guys
learn “how they think they should treat people. A lot of guys get the impression from
music videos that girls are like objects like in the OutKast video. They don’t learn
anything positive.”

Responses from Rita, 14, and Sunshine, 17, indicate the confusion some girls
experience regarding the educational role of media. While discussing the content of
music videos, it appeared they began to reevaluate how these messages impact young
people. For example, when discussing the storyline in the Missy Elliott video, Sunshine
stated,

It doesn’t tell nothing. Show the way how you should dance. There’s nothing
wrong with it. I mean, everybody dressed in their colors—how a program should
be. No mix-matching and, one thing, there’s violence in it—teach the children
how to fight and stuff. But, I mean—weren’t no cuss words up in there. Ain’t no
bad language up in it.

And when discussing whether children learn from music videos, Rita, 14, noted,

No, because it’s just like a type of music that they listen to. Like my little sister,
she loves hiphop. And whenever that comes on the radio, my little sister knows
every word from right to left. She knows the cuss words. I mean, I think the . . .
cursing. That’s the only thing wrong, the cursing.

The examples noted indicate that this population, when prompted, will critically
evaluate media information. They are not naïve about media’s societal role and would
like more discussion and interaction about the content and production of media messages.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

The purpose of this dissertation was to explore the meanings that at-risk adolescent girls develop through viewing and listening to the verbal and nonverbal social signs and symbols in music videos. Despite consistent public concern since the 1980s about the impact of music videos, relatively little research has been conducted about this issue. A majority of the studies about music videos that do exist are quantitative content analyses or experiments determining reactions to certain musical genres. There were no qualitative studies that specifically addressed how at-risk adolescent girls use music videos or what the videos mean to them. As there is such concern about how music videos impact the behaviors of youth, at-risk adolescent girls are an obvious choice for studying this phenomenon. However, they are substantially underrepresented in academic studies, which may be attributable to how the overall community turns away from this population, “rendering them invisible because female delinquency was seen as neither interesting nor important until the last few decades, and there is still a paucity of research on this topic” (Belknap, 1996, p. 5).

The qualitative methods used in this dissertation were in-depth individual interviews, focus groups, participant observation, and collection of room photographs and media diaries. Interviews with 36 at-risk adolescent girls aged 11 to 18, and their media artifacts, provided insight into how this population uses music videos for information, entertainment, and education. The findings from this study apply only to this...
particular group of young women. It cannot be assumed that these findings are
generalizable to any other group of at-risk adolescent women.

Music videos have been denigrated since the 1980s as commercials that exploit
women and promote violence, early sexual activity, and drug use. Strasburger and
Wilson (2002) refer to this phenomenon as media panic, where society tends to fear a
new medium as it develops. This appears to be especially true when dealing with new
forms of music. Concerns about music videos include their psychological impact on
youth, where normative expectations are potentially developed about conflict resolution,
race, and male-female relationships. Participants echo these concerns, primarily noting
that others are more susceptible to the negative messages. But, surprisingly, they also
find that music videos are inspirational, providing information about healthy
psychosocial behaviors, such as independence and spirituality.

Most prior research suggests that music videos have a primarily negative impact
on the social development of young people. Interestingly, very little research has focused
on the potential for prosocial influences of television and other visual media. As Mares
and Woodard (2001) noted, “public and scholarly attention has focused on the
accumulation of evidence that television contributes to violence and hostility. The
possibility that television viewing may foster friendly, prosocial interactions has received
less attention” (p. 183). However, Luke (1997) and Gardstrom (1999) pointed to the
potential prosocial impact of music videos. Luke (1997) noted that much of the music
consumed by adolescents is “concerned with social transformation through politically
positive lyrics such as pro-education messages . . . and also promote antiracism,
antiviolence, anti-drug, and pro-environment messages” (p. 31). My study found that
music videos do indeed provide a prosocial function to this group of at risk adolescents.
Respondents believed they learned problem-solving techniques and positive role modeling from watching music videos. They discussed music video role models that promoted positive, prosocial behaviors, citing a number of examples, such as performers Usher and Alicia Keyes.

Findings indicate that participants are learning specific social behaviors that are cultivated by the multisensory and affective impact of music videos. The five themes that were identified through constant comparison of the data point to how this population uses music videos as social text to form identity and as an information tool to understand the signs and symbols of youth culture. Participants supported the findings of prior research that social learning, both observational and incidental, is taking place through using this multisensory medium. The girls viewed music videos as a representation of reality regarding teenage developmental issues and conflicts. They also thought that music videos are entertaining, educational, and informative, providing truthful information about how to manage “real life” situations and solve problems. However, they reject certain images and messages because of the negative connotations, such as the sexual stereotyping of women, the unrealistic depiction of unsafe behaviors without consequences, demeaning lyrics, and the marketing of inappropriate content to young audiences.

Participants, especially the nine adolescent parents, expressed concern about how much access young people have to sexual and violent media content. The young parents appeared more aware of media’s impact on their own behaviors and choices. They were worried about the exposure of their children to inappropriate messages. Because of this unique perspective, the expectant mothers were identified as such throughout the study.
Television viewers are emotionally engaged by television programming, learning social behaviors through observation. It is conceivable that prosocial content potentially could have stronger effects on viewers than antisocial content because the behaviors are more in line with established social norms. My study provides evidence that warrants further investigation about how media may inadvertantly present prosocial information that affects viewers, specifically at-risk adolescents.

Conclusions and Implications

Theoretical

This population of at-risk girls admitted to being influenced by the images and lyrics presented in music videos. A majority of the girls, however, also claimed that they were less influenced than other people by music video content and production. Participants felt that young children and boys were strongly impacted by the negative information in these multisensory messages, but claimed that they were not as affected.

Evidence of this third-person effect is present throughout the interviews. As defined by Perloff (2002), “the third-person effect is an individual’s perception that a message will exert a stronger impact on others than on the self. Individuals may overestimate the impact media exerts on others, underestimate media effects on the self, or both” (p. 490). The third-person effect emphasizes the perceived effects of a message, where observers assume that others’ shortcomings (i.e., gullibility) make them incapable of considering factors like persuasive intent. This logically leads observers to think that others will be influenced by messages that they see through (Lasorsa, 1992). Girls claim to learn only dance, fashion, lyrics, and hairstyles from videos; but they believe that boys learn such things as sexual stereotypes for women and sexual harassment behaviors.
Participants also think that young children mimic negative behaviors and attitudes modeled in music videos, such as using violence as a conflict resolution tool.

Reasons for this orientation could include the human tendency to perceive the self in ways as one who is better than other people, a need to control unpredictable life events, such as media’s influence, and the inability to accept that media has an influence because it would reduce one’s perception of control over external events (Perloff, 2002). These motivations are consistent with the orientation of these at-risk adolescent girls, who are struggling to maintain a positive and self-determining sense of well-being.

My study also supports prior research noting that social learning is taking place when adolescents watch and listen to music videos, whether through incidental, role-playing, or observational processing of information. The results confirm that this group of children are learning and mimicking specific social behaviors from media models. The girls are watching videos not only for entertainment but also to gain information about gender roles; current trends in fashion; new dances; and changes in language, or slang, development. The surprising finding is that they are learning prosocial attitudes and behaviors from watching and imitating music video models.

Developed by Albert Bandura (2001), social learning theory, now called social cognitive theory, posits that children can learn new behaviors through direct experience or by observing and imitating others in their social environment. According to this theory, a child observes a model’s behavior and witnesses the reinforcement the model receives. The child’s responses depend on whether the model is rewarded or punished, and the child may imitate the behavior if the model gains reward. Cognitive processes, such as attention and retention, play a part in how the child symbolically construes or makes sense of the model’s behavior. As individuals, children attend to different features
of a models’ behavior, have unique experiences they use to interpret and evaluate the model’s actions, and store different information in memory. These individual differences can help explain why some children might imitate a model while others do not.

Not surprisingly, this study also finds that these individual differences play a substantial part in how music is understood and meanings are developed. Each individual processes information differently. While there were some similarities in response, it was also evident that participants brought different experiences to their interpretation of the music video messages. Every viewer drew from her cultural background, and the music videos signified different meanings for each one. For example, while many of the older girls felt that Beyoncé’s video reflected their experiences, the younger ones thought the video taught them a lesson about dealing with a potential future scenario. This finding has implication for developing media literacy curriculum that addresses the difference stages in adolescent sexual identity formation. Deconstructing the symbolism present in videos can help young women identify where and how they are learning specific sexual attitudes and behaviors.

Roe (1995) proposes a theory of media delinquency that is also supported by this study. When studying why adolescents use socially devalued media content, such as rap and heavy metal, Roe found that at-risk adolescents are drawn to the music that reflects their feelings, such as despondency, suicide, and other difficult self-identity issues. Instead of causing negative perceptions, the music helps the at-risk adolescent process the feelings. This study found that this group of at-risk adolescents is also drawn to music that reflects the real life issues they have faced. For example, one participant discussed how listening to music with violent lyrics helped her process negative feelings. In addition, several participants related to Eminem’s lyrics because he “told the truth about
“Eminem, a controversial rapper, is often publicly denigrated because of the domestic and sexual violence depicted in his lyrics. Other participants thought his videos were the worst they had ever seen because of the violent content. This finding points to the importance of continuing to recognize the differences in how individuals accept and interpret the messages in music videos. It has been established that there are multiple meanings to a song, depending on the cultural orientation of the listener and the social context. Even when the lyrics are understood by all listeners, the meanings are often disputed (Christianson & Roberts, 1998).

Findings from my study also support existing research that identifies the uses and gratifications youth gain from using music videos. The uses and gratifications approach places more emphasis on how the audience actively makes goal-directed choices in their media use (Harris, 1994). This study found that these at-risk adolescent girls use music videos for similar reasons as other adolescents, including identify formation, social text, mood enhancement, and learning social trends. Additional uses and gratifications identified in this study include the modeling of specific prosocial behaviors, watching music videos as a social group ritual, and language development. For this population, popular music videos are physiologically arousing, have psychosocial benefits, and the content provides them with information about society. The girls pay attention to the positive images, message and role models depicted in music videos. The videos appear to be easily accessible and enjoyable representations of youth culture that give participants information about what’s considered acceptable and cutting-edge behavior.

**Symbolic Interactionism**

Symbolic interactionism is the study of how one constructs the social self through using situated symbols, such as rituals and mythologies. In symbolic interactionism,
people are active and dynamic, defining and responding to their environment. They are not passive, but construct and modify meaning through social interaction and individual interpretation.

Adolescents spend more time with music than any other medium, and the affective impact of music has been well documented (Christianson & Roberts, 1998). This study finds that these at-risk girls actively construct and modify what music videos mean to them, based on their individual differences and social orientation. Participants ritually watch music videos, constructing meanings about gender roles, cultural identification, and appropriate verbal and nonverbal language. Significant symbols presented in music videos, such as gestures, slang, dance moves, sexual attitudes, and other behaviors are important symbolic short-cuts that help viewers interpret meanings. Sometimes the girls consciously choose to mimic certain behaviors, such as dance steps, speaking slang, and wearing new fashions.

The at-risk girls acknowledge that music videos are designed to influence their perceptions of reality. They pointed out that music videos present both positive and negative methods for negotiating their cultural environments, such as how to respond to male sexual advances. Generally, the population sees these videos as a source for social information, and responds to music messages that reflect the issues in their lives. Respondents also had some critical awareness of what they are observing and learning through the symbolic representation and role modeling presented in music videos. For example, girls discussed the difficulty of watching the consistent sexual stereotyping of women in music videos because these images did not reflect how girls really look.

The potential to harness these immensely popular media to provide additional prosocial or health-related messages is enormous. As Mares and Woodard (2001) point
out, the research on prosocial television has focused on prosocial programming aimed specifically at children. This study found that this population, aged 11 to 18, uses music videos as a social utility tool, to find out more about teen culture standards. While music television executives acknowledge their reach to teens aged 16 or older, it appears that much younger children are also using these programs as symbolic representations of today’s teen culture. This trend indicates a need to investigate the prosocial effects from programming that was never intended for young audiences.

**Semiotics**

Music videos are rich in symbolic presentation, providing a multi-sensory syntax that is designed to gain and keep audience attention. Music videos are social code systems that use a number of semiotic devices, including words, images, sounds, gestures, and objects. As a semiotic text, music videos are commercials that promote artists and their subsequent products. As Jhally (1994) pointed out, “music television is the ultimate dream of network executives—a channel that featured nothing but advertising” (p. 152). Music videos have become the main marketing mechanism for popular music.

Surprisingly, participants did not discuss many of the verbal signs and symbols presented in the three music videos. By showing the videos first with the music, then without any sound, the study was designed to gain information about how participants perceive the lyrics and visuals, separately or together. Social concerns about popular music often involve the anti-social messages perceived in the lyrics.

There was some focus on the significance of specific visual signs in each video, rather than their frequency. For example, participants were uncomfortable with the stereotypical sexual presentation of women in the OutKast video. Surprisingly, they were
not critical of the lyrics, which reflected the sexual stereotyping presented in the visuals.

For example, lyrics included such phrases as the following:

So keep your hands off my cheeks, and let me study how you ride the beat
You big freak! Skinny, slim women got the camel toe within them
You can hump them, lift them, bend them, give them something to remember.
(OutKast, 2004)

In addition, Missy Elliott used a substantial amount of slang and swear words in her video. Examples of the lyrics in this song are as follows:

Don’t you see how them bitches move they bootay
Everytime you play this record, smell like coochie
Follow ‘dem, Screamin’ like a groupay
Misdemeanor move my nookie like a hoochay
For them hatas fuck whatever you say
Because you know I’m too cool for you anyway
I’m just a bad bitch. (Missy Elliott, 2004)

The lyrics in Missy Elliott’s song were received with mixed responses by participants. A few of the girls could not understand them, some thought the words were “bad,” but liked her message and most participants felt her song was empowering. Some participants also claimed they did not usually pay attention to visuals or lyrics but were more interested in the beat of the song. This orientation supports existing research that indicates that the beat of a song is often more recognizable to users than the lyrics (Gunderson, 1985; Rouner, 1990; Strasburger & Wilson, 2002). As Shepherd (1990) indicates in *Music as a Social Text*, the social function of music is often inherent in the beat, which listeners express through symbolic social action such as dancing, singing, or keeping time. Ballard, Dodson and Bazzini (1999) also found that, “adolescents often do not comprehend lyrics . . . and cite lyrical content as the least important reason for liking a song. A combination of rhythm, vocals, music, and melody affects music preference, not lyrical content per se” (p. 478).
The lack of participant concern regarding the language in these lyrics could be due to the changes in youth culture slang, where swear words and sexual imagery are more acceptable, a misunderstanding of the lyrics, or a disinterest in what the lyrics say. It could also be attributed to how participants have constructed different social meanings for these words than adults. Language is an important part of how signification develops within a culture. Today’s youth appears to be developing new forms of linguistic cultural codes, interpreting and using language presented in music videos and other media as a common form of social text.

In contrast to the OutKast and Missy Elliott videos, participants responded positively to the overall message in the Beyoncé video, especially the lyrics. The story resonated with respondents because they felt it truthfully depicted a real life scenario that many had also experienced. There was more attention paid to specific symbols in this video, such as her hair cutting, violence, and bathing. An interesting development was how 15 respondents saw a juxtaposition between this video’s lyrics and visuals. As Shantai, 13, said, “Her movement was saying come back, come back, but her words wasn’t” (N3). This observation suggests that participants recognize specific semiotic codes in music videos, such as body language, lyrics, and clothing, and look for coherence and consistency in the message. As audience members, they understood the process of communicating with symbolic images, although they were not generally analytical about what they are watching. The girls were looking for a common signification system, where the visuals and lyrics provided a consistent message.

Clothing was the primary semiotic code that girls focused on in each video. Participants developed meanings about the videos based on the costumes, making assumptions about the dancers because of their appearance. Girls discussed the lack of
clothing on women in the OutKast video juxtaposed by the 3-piece suits the men were wearing; the three outfits, earrings, and four hairstyles worn by Beyoncé; and the black and white costumes worn by dancers in the Missy Elliott video, which denoted group identity to many participants. In other words, the Missy Elliott dancers were identified by their “colors,” which helped participants identify the video’s theme as a dance-off between two groups.

The girls also discussed the bodies of women in the videos, and how their dancing styles communicated specific sexual messages. The black women in the OutKast video and Beyoncé reflected the stereotypical white standard of beauty, with thin bodies, straight hair, and substantial make up. Beyoncé also was referred to as “beautiful” by several black participants. Because Beyoncé is African American, this response invites further exploration regarding identity formation and modeling for adolescent black girls. The absence of people like themselves in media can have a significant impact on how young people perceive their importance. A lack of representation can be detrimental to at-risk adolescents. As Huntemann and Morgan note, “one of the most powerful mechanisms of keeping power from a group is to render its members invisible” (p. 316).

In contrast, Missy Elliott was seen as a role model who proudly proclaims her status as a renegade performer. Respondents identified with her physical features and rebellious attitude about social standards of beauty. Participants believed her recent substantial weight loss was because of health reasons, not to become more sexually desirable.

Participant reactions to Missy Elliott suggest that they are aware of basic semiotic cultural codes that develop social expectations about standards of beauty, body image, and behaviors. These girls use music videos as social text, forming opinions about their
own bodies based on the images they see. Concerns about the body and sexuality are at the heart of how women today are encouraged to construct identity. An impossible standard of beauty, achievable only through plastic surgery, keeps women in a state of anxiety about their worth. The power of this beauty myth is that it has been internalized by women. Because music videos reinforce stereotyped notions of gender, a deconstruction of these commercial tools could provide girls with some insights about how they are forming sexual identity.

**Media Literacy Curriculum for At-Risk Youth**

The Burt, Resnick and Novick (1998) suggests the social environment is a key component in the healthy psychosocial development of children. In American society, the broad socialization practices, where there is little conformity, allow for more exposure to risk-taking behaviors and attitudes. In order to address the needs of the growing population of at-risk adolescents, there must be a focus on the entire context of their environment, including family, community, media, school, and larger social institutions. There are specific associations between their environment, individual behaviors, and outcomes that can be addressed through a focus on education, increasing literacies in media, and other print and nonprint-based texts.

Adolescent girls are facing a myriad of physical, psychological, and physiological development changes. Factors that help them deal with these changes include connecting to a nonexploitive adult, achieving school success, spiritual connectedness, and living in a family environment with low stress levels. At-risk adolescent girls are often missing at least one of these elements. A significant factor underlying the risk behaviors of adolescent girls is educational failure. Research suggests that traditional school programs have diminished the self-worth of at-risk students because they face what they perceive
as unattainable tasks (Emery & Rother, 1999; King & O’Brien, 2002). In addition, assumptions are often made about their intellectual ability because they are generally not highly literate in traditional print-based formats. Findings from this study imply that teachers should begin to recognize and incorporate the 21st Century visual literacies that at-risk children bring to the classroom. To assist at-risk youth, this study and other research suggests that teachers should redefine texts to include the various signs and symbols used to communicate in today’s society. Semali (2003) defines this literacy orientation as “intermediality—where print and visual media meet to create textuality that bridges home, classroom, and community contexts” (p. 15).

Findings from my study substantiate the need for developing media literacy curriculum that is specifically designed to reach at-risk adolescent audiences. Because of the risk factors identified in the home, individual, and external environment, such as lack of parental involvement, this population is more susceptible to the information presented in media. As noted previously, the educational, criminal justice, and medical communities now recognize that media plays an active role in promoting risk-taking behavior in youth and adolescents (Behson, 2002; Hallett, 2003; Steyer, 2002; Villani, 2001; Strasburger & Wilson, 2002). In addition, there also are implications for recognizing and harnessing the unexpected prosocial impact of music videos and other forms of media.

My study could provide information for schools and social service agencies to develop media literacy programs that are educational and student centered, using contemporary programming that resonates with the at-risk adolescent population. Recognizing the role of music videos as social text that impacts adolescent identity formation would be an important component of effective media literacy curriculum. It is
a natural process to include youth media in the classroom, thereby providing a bridge between today’s youth culture and curriculum. As noted in the 2003 Kaiser Family Foundation survey, MTV claimed to reach 75% of 16- to 24-year olds in America (Kaiser Family Foundation & MTV, 2003, p. 7). Findings show that children much younger than 16 are watching music television and subsequently developing expectations about their culture. Because young audiences are using music videos, it is suggested that educators develop early education media literacy programs to teach children about the potential impact of the programming.

Based on the findings in my study, it also appears that at-risk teen girls are already interested in critical analysis of information. This group of respondents displayed an awareness of media messages, and an interest in learning more about how to deconstruct media information. Teachers and researchers already find that today’s youth are well versed in using diverse symbol systems, drawing from a wide repertoire when constructing knowledge. However, most children do not have a formal and critically analytical introduction to the mediated world they negotiate. Learning to deconstruct the nonverbal and verbal codes of media narratives may help at-risk adolescents gain some cognitive and emotional distance from the persuasive intent of most media messages.

In addition, substantial anecdotal evidence and some empirical data suggest that media-literate at-risk youth are more likely to avoid violence, substance abuse, and other negative behaviors. Examples of media literacy programs designed for at-risk youth, such as Flashpoint, exemplify how effective this approach may be in discouraging risk behaviors. Through questioning both the form and content of media, participants are gaining skills in semiotic analysis, perhaps developing critical thinking skills that will assist them in negotiating today’s mediated society.
Limitations of the Study

Limitations of the study include the difficulties in accessing the at-risk adolescent female population. Access issues included finding organizations willing to participate and setting up interviews with limited numbers of participants within five organizations. In addition, it was sometimes impossible to interact consistently with participants. As at-risk children, they move from place to place, are often absent from school, or jailed. A future study might be more manageable with external funding and/or approval from the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice.

The psychographic and demographic differences between the researcher and participants were also limiting factors in the study. The researcher was viewed as a teacher and had to encourage respondents to voice their opinions. Once this was rapport established, participants were quick to discuss the videos.

Other limitations of the study included the lack of participant motivation to return media diaries and cameras, and the use of only one genre of music. Future studies would be structured differently, using two or three genres of music for comparison and clearly noting compensation as a reward for participation. Future research also should take into account the “groupthink” mentality that took place in the two focus groups, where participants parroted each others’ responses.

In addition, as in all qualitative research, the study is not generalizable to the at-risk adolescent female population. A qualitative snowball approach was used to gain participants for the study. Forty volunteers were recruited by teachers, administrators, and house parents within the five organizations.
Suggestions for Future Research

Suggestions for future research include the following:

• Studying the potential for developing prosocial media literacy programs that use music videos
• Determining how gender role information is marketed to at-risk youth
• Assessing how at-risk adolescents are active users of specific media
• Examining how adolescent risk behaviors are depicted in today’s mediated environment.
• Developing an analysis of media’s perceived role in shaping expectations of at-risk youth.
• Determining the primary choices in the media diet of at-risk teens.
• Studying the perceived importance of television as social force in modern society.

Questions for further study include the following:

• What other media, if any, do at-risk adolescents use on a daily basis?
• What is the potential for using music videos as prosocial teaching tools?
• How do girls that are perceived as more ‘mainstream’ perceive and use music videos?
• How do other age groups, younger and older, use music videos?
• How do at-risk adolescent boys ages 11 to 18 perceive and use music videos?
• What are the primary media used by the families of at-risk adolescent girls?

Media construct a substantial amount of the information that young people receive about their world. As noted in the 2005 Kaiser Family Foundation Report, American children are exposed to 8½ hours of media every day, often using several media simultaneously. Within this media diet, many persuasive messages are directed at youth because of their current and future buying power. This trend has significant implications for youth workers. It is important that caretakers recognize the potential impact of media, and address this issue in classrooms and other social environments. Teaching young people how to recognize and negotiate their media diets may help them develop skills in critical analysis.
APPENDIX A
POTENTIAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

(After viewing 3 popular music videos that are in current rotation on BET, MTV, or VH1—first with sound, then without sound)

Content of Music Videos

1) Talk to me about the music video you just saw. What do you see in this video?
2) Tell me what they were doing.
3) Were they telling a story about anything? What was the story?
4) Do you think the words or the pictures best tell the story? Why?
5) What do you think the story’s based on?
6) Does this video teach you a lesson? If so, what is it?
7) Imagine watching this video with adults. How would they react?
8) What would your friends think of this video? Would they watch it?
9) Do you own any of this artist’s music? If so, where did you learn about the artist?
   Have you seen this video before?
10) What would you remember most about this video two weeks from now?

“Value” Perceptions of Music Videos

1) Rate the videos from best to worst. Why did you rate them this way?
2) Pretend you’re a music video critic. Would these videos win an award? Why?
3) What is the worst video you ever saw? Why?
4) What is the best video you ever saw? Why?

Use of Music Videos

1) Why do you usually watch music videos?
2) Do you ever talk about videos with your friends? If so, what do you talk about?
   Where do you usually talk about things like this?
3) Have you ever carried out an idea you saw in a music video? What was it?
4) Is there a music video artist who you admire? Is there one you wish you could be?
   Who is it? Why?

How Music Videos Present Information

1) Have you ever listened to a song, and then watched the video, realizing that the video tells a different story then you thought the song was about? What do you think about this? Is the video usually better or worse than your idea of the song?
2) Do you learn anything from music videos? If so, what do you learn? If not, what use do music videos have to you? Do you think boys learn anything from videos?

3) Some doctors say kids shouldn't watch music videos. Why do you think they say this?

4) If you were (are) a parent, would you let your child watch music videos? Why or why not?

5) Do kids learn things from music videos? What do they learn? How old should children be before they can watch music videos?

**Use of Music**

1) What kind of music do you like? Do you have any favorite musicians? If so, who?
Figure B-1. Cover of 7-day media diary
Figure B-2. Day 1 media of diary
Figure B-3. Day 2 of media diary
Figure B-4. Day 3 of media diary
Figure B-5. Day 4 of media diary
Figure B-6. Day 5 of media diary
Figure B-7. Day 6 of media diary
Figure B-8. Day 7 of media diary
APPENDIX C
EXAMPLE OF INTERVIEW WITH PARTICIPANT “RED”

Video 1: Outkast

H: What did you see in this video? Tell me what they were doing, if you picked up any visuals.
A: I mostly watched all visual and it was not oriented especially if I was at a younger age, I probably would be . . . expecting that I would have to look like that in order to fit in.
A: Seems a little provocative. I try not to influence the young ones, you know—not to do all this—but you got this on TV and naturally they are going to follow their elders; they’re older . . .
H: What’s interesting is that families do really try but the culture has been such a huge influence.
A: Some girls even go to extremes to look like that; sometimes a little much.
H: There is a lot of plastic surgery in . . .
A: Yup, they think they have to look a certain way to fit.
H: I just read a statistic that over 11,000 girls in America that are under 18 have breast implants, so there is a real truth in what you are saying . . . how they are focusing on a certain look.
A: You don’t see unattractive or heavy set girls in these videos; so, they are going to think well, if they have boobs and plastic surgery so should we.
H: Is there a story about anything in this video?
A: No, other than what I said, like you don’t have to be a certain way and look a certain way. But, just by the looks of it, that’s what you are supposed to be.
H: Is it more effective without the sound?
A: Yes. Only because they were doing more than what the music was saying, the words were saying. You see it and it’s more provocative, should I say.
H: Give me an example.
A: The fact that they were partially naked and I think that that is inappropriate for someone younger than me or someone my age to watch.
H: Like with the women in bikinis and high heels in an auto parts shop.
A: Yup, normally you don’t see that.
H: Do the words or pictures best tell the story? Why?
A: I mean if you listen to the words and then watch the video you know what they are saying screen wise but when you see it without the music you are going to think totally different.
H: OK. So it gives you more information. Why do you think that’s true?
A: I really can’t say. I mean, the words fit the way that they are singing, but then again as soon as the music goes out and the words go out you look at it totally different because they are doing more things, I guess, provocatively . . .

H: You catch it more somehow because your senses . . .
A: Yes.

H: Does this video teach you a lesson?
A: Not unless it’s an inappropriate lesson, no.

H: What would be an inappropriate lesson, do you think?
A: I mean, they are not making any sense walking out in the bikinis in an auto shop and partially not dressed.

H: So the information that they are giving is inappropriate in terms of behavior?
A: Yup.

H: Imagine watching this video with adults? How would they react?
A: Depends on their background. If you were to watch it with someone who’s not seen videos and not amongst these videos and music and they watch it it’s like: their facial expressions are like ‘wow, what’s happened’. And, if you watch it with someone whose background stimulates this, they think it’s cool and they don’t think anything of it.

H: So it really just depends on who it is?
A: Yup.

H: What would your friends think of this video? Would they watch it?
A: I don’t know what it is these days, because my background is more into the redneck way so I am not into this kind of stuff but my boyfriend’s background isn’t and I think personally that’s what brings out the negativity in him is the music and the words that he watches. I think it brings out the negativity towards things and he is very rude towards people because this is how they are.

H: Would your female friends enjoy it?
A: Yes. I don’t know, to tell you the truth. See, back home, you can’t listen to different things: you’ve got to listen to one group. If one group is listening then everybody is going to listen to it and I just see it like that, you can’t be different. You all got to be the same.

H: Do you own any of OutKast’s music?
A: No.

H: Have you heard of OutKast before?
A: Yeah. I have heard of them. This is what my sister and her best friend listen to so I hear the music.

H: Have you seen this video before?
A: Yup.

H: What would you remember most about this video in two or three weeks?
A: The provocative message.

H: Any more comments?
A: No.

Video 2: Beyoncé

H: Have you seen this video before?
A: Yes. I just think, word wise it fits in once you see the whole video. But then when you see it without the words you are not going to understand it because it is going backwards.
H: You know, it is interesting, because some girls pick that up and other girls don’t: the going backward, the technique that they used on this and it is kind of interesting to see the difference in awareness.

A: I mean, if I looked at it now and not knew the words, I probably wouldn’t understand it.

H: None of these symbols would speak to you, like some of the things that she is doing?

A: Yes, she looks upset throughout the entire video but once you get to the end then you know why. But, you really can’t understand it till you get there.

H: Because they don’t show the guy.

A: Yes.

H: I don’t see this technique very often, I think it’s because it confuses people.

A: They want you to understand it and either react to it or don’t react to it and you really can’t react to something like this because you don’t, unless the words are there you don’t know what they are doing.

H: What do you think about her behavior in this?

A: Her dressing, no. Her behavior, again, I couldn’t say unless I got to the end. I can’t say really now. But once she gets . . . I guess what she says when she finds out . . . Her reaction would be a reaction from everybody if they did the same thing. So nobody, nobody’s ever together anymore. Everybody is doing the same exact thing. Everybody is cheating; I just think it’s sad. I don’t see anybody married anymore. Nobody can get along anymore. Nobody can be trusted anymore because of sin.

H: Do you have any ideas as to why that is taking place in our culture?

A: No. I don’t know why it happens. Maybe they just came to the conclusion that that is what they have.

H: As a young person growing up in it right now, do you see certain things that adults are doing that kind of perpetuate it, makes it happen more?

A: Oh, yeah. Just for kids our age to see adults doing it and it’s like they have to do it. Again, just because they are elder people doing it they have to do it, you know, they see that mom and dad having a boyfriend every other day: girlfriend/boyfriend: you know, and it’s as if they have to. They can’t keep one steady boyfriend or they have to cheat because the one is not pleasing them enough.

H: Do you think they are mimicking adults?

A: Yes.

H: Is there story in this video?

A: It is an everyday thing, the way I see it as.

H: The fact that he cheated on her?

A: Yes. I see it as an occurrence with everybody. It’s like, going out on the streets and seeing it and it’s now on the video. So they are seeing it . . . you know.

H: Do you think that this video reflects what is going on?

A: Yes. Very much.

H: Do the words or pictures best tell the story?

A: This one, I think the words do only because the video is going backwards and you really can’t understand what it is doing. The words. I mean it is slowed down to where you can understand them to understand what the words are.
H: Is there a lesson in this video?
A: Yeah. If I were younger I would see it as “every guy cheats”.
H: That is what you would see in this?
A: Yes. That’s what every guys like and you have to be by yourself in order to be happy, that is what I see it as.
H: How do you think adults would react to this video?
A: Same thing. It is an everyday occurrence now. I don’t think that they would have too much of a reaction, physically, but they would probably see it as an everyday occurrence. It is not unusual to see it in a video now that you see it every day.
H: So, this is just an example of what is going on?
A: Yes.
H: Friends react?
A: I couldn’t even tell you.
H: You don’t think they would like it?
A: I think they would like it. And girl wise, I think that because we have so much emotions we are going to take it like we can’t trust anybody any more. Guys, they are going to be like “so what, that was my girl”: move on. They don’t have emotions, you know, I think. Girls have a lot more emotions and take it a lot harder and see it as that guy does it; I can’t trust anybody.
H: Do you own any of Beyoncé’s music?
A: No.
H: When did you first hear of Beyoncé?
A: When she was actually in her own group: Destiny’s Child.
H: Have you seen this video before?
A: Yes.
H: What would you remember most about this video in two or three weeks?
A: An everyday occurrence. I can’t . . . I mean . . . I don’t think the words hurt me. I don’t think the V hurts me, but I just see it as like that is what happens now.
H: The couples cheating on each other, is typical?
A: Yes. Basically.
H: Any more comments?
A: No.

**Video 3: Missy Elliott**

A: This one will really influence the young ones because there aren’t elderly people dancing in this: they are all under age.
H: She has a lot of younger kids in her videos now.
A: I think they are trying to compete or something; that is what it looks like. They are trying to compete for a prize.
H: What tells you that in this video?
A: They’re different groups. They are each have their own: of course dancing, of course is the style. But, they’re competing— what they are competing for, I don’t know. They are trying to show off to make themselves look good.
H: So they are identified by the costumes that they are wearing? Is that kind of how you can tell they are in different groups?
A: Yes.
H: (viewing ends) Tell me what you think of that one.
A: Sad.
H: Why do you think it’s sad?
A: Just the competing, again, it is showing young ones you got to compete for what you want; try to be cool to get what you want.
H: What is the story? Do you think that’s the story?
A: Yes. You have to compete to get what you want, that is basically what it is showing you.
H: Do the word or pictures best tell the story?
A: I think the visuals are more. I got more from the visuals than from the words because she basically repeats some words including . . . .
H: So you think the visuals tell the story?
A: Yes.
H: How do you think adults would react to this one?
A: They wouldn’t be surprised at how they are acting, but they would probably say the same thing, you know, competing nowadays—you got to compete for anything. Girls fighting over one boy. Boys fighting over one girl. You got to compete. The words, I think would get them. They’d probably say be surprised if her head could fit through the door because she is so over confident.
H: Is there a lesson in this video?
A: No.
H: How would your friends react to this one?
A: I think they would enjoy the music. I don’t think that they would understand the words.
H: Do you own any of Missy Elliott’s music?
A: No.
H: Where did you first hear of Missy Elliott?
A: Long time ago. I probably listened to the radio, but it wasn’t like recently. A while ago.
H: Have you seen this video before?
A: Yes.
H: What would you remember most about this video in a few weeks?
A: Competitiveness. Yeah. She is so over confident. Losing that extra weight that she had, she is getting a figure and now, I just think her head is too big for her body.
H: Any more comments about this one?
A: No.
H: Rate the videos from best to worst, and explain why you rated them this way.
A: I think if we are talking in terms of who it would influence the youth most—I think the last one would probably be the worst one only because it shows more visually—be competitive. And, then, the first one would probably go next. I don’t think that the second one had very much influence on anybody. It probably would, word wise.
H: Beyoncé.
A: Yeah, but, I think it was probably the least provocative and the least visual.
H: So, Missy Elliott would be the worst?
A: Yes.
H: And then OutKast and Beyoncé would be tied or?
A: Probably! Yeah, if we were going for youth wise, what the youth would think, I think that they would be tied. I don’t either one is different.
H: One isn’t any better than the other one?
A: No.
H: Pretend you are a music critic. Would any of these win an award?
A: Beyoncé for truth if she won an award; being honest.
H: What is the worst video you’ve ever seen?
A: It’s this kind of music that, I think everything is the worst. I mean, they say country music is just as bad but I see it as this is more influencing them, especially with the kids.
H: I’ll share something with you that a number of young women have said and that’s Eminem’s music.
A: Yeah, see, I don’t see him more now. I don’t see him out a lot now. So, I don’t think he’s hurting this generation. But, when I was younger, he was pretty big; he was pretty well known so if he was hurting them, I don’t think he is making a big deal now. I don’t think he is showing off as much.
H: Do you think that he hurt your generation?
A: He probably set a really bad example for our generation. He talks a lot of trash about his wife and made her look really bad and in one of his videos he killed her and I just, maybe that was just a little much.
H: What about the best video you’ve ever seen?
A: I don’t know because I don’t listen to music very often.
H: Nobody comes to mind?
A: No.
H: Why do you usually watch music videos?
A: Basically, the beat. This music I would only listen to for the beat because I have to deal with it—boyfriend, best friend, sister. No matter who I am with I am listening to it. So, I wouldn’t listen to it for influence because of the words and the visual effect.
H: Do you ever talk about music videos?
A: No.
H: Have you ever done anything that you saw in a music video?
A: No.
H: Is there any particular music video artist that you admire?
A: Usher.
H: Why Usher?
A: He seems to be very blunt about himself and his music and he is very truthful when he says what he says and his visuals are the same; they are not provocative, they are not, I think kids, probably the only one that would influence me really big because he has a really good background. It is not like he is out there doing all that other guy stuff, like, his music and his lyrics I would say are touching.
H: Have you ever listened to song, and then watched the video and it’s different than you thought?
A: No.
H: That has never happened to you?
A: No.
H: Ok.
A: I don’t think so.
H: Never envisioned a song to mean something else and then you saw the video and it didn’t match your thoughts, at all?
A: No.
H: Do you learn anything from music videos?
A: I hope life doesn’t actually turn out to be like that. I hope that our new generation, our youth, aren’t leading to that.
H: Leading to what? What do you mean?
A: Going into being, you know, if you are overweight going to be an anorexic because you have to look the way they do or some videos that have sex in it—they tend to have sex.
H: So you do think that people learn from them?
A: Yes.
H: Do you think boys learn from music videos?
A: I just think they don’t . . . If they see these videos I think they see it as they have to date the beautiful type. They don’t go for the in-types, they go for the out-types.
H: Very much an image culture.
A: Yes.
H: Some doctors think young kids shouldn’t watch music videos. Why do you think they say this?
A: Because of the influence.
H: And, what are the things that you see other than what you mentioned already about sexual behavior. Anything else?
A: Drugs.
H: Anything else?
A: I can only think of sex and drugs because that is all I see nowadays with kids; sex and drugs, that is all they do. Back home, in order to fit in you got to be pregnant.
H: Where?
A: Fort Myers. That is all I seen when I go home for vacation or if I go home for the week. I go to the high school, and I feel bad because I am in that situation but nowadays they are not willing to take up that responsibility . . . It doesn’t hit them. I mean, kids younger than me, 14 -15 are doing it and that’s what scares me about my sister—she is 14 going on 15 and hanging out with those kinds of people and I just don’t want her to get pushed in that direction.
H: As a mom, will you let your child watch music videos?
A: Not this type of music.
H: Tell me about what you would let your child watch?
A: It’s going to be hard especially living in a “home” and her father being the way he is. I think it is going to be a little hard to keep her away from that type of music and keeping her away from watching that type of thing because that’s what they been watching and that’s what influences them.
H: Now, when you say that type of music are you talking about the hip hop music?
A: Yeah. The hip hop and the rap because I couldn’t see trying to get my boyfriend away from that type of music because that’s just what he thinks he is.
H: Do you think there’s an appropriate age for children to start watching music videos?
A: Probably 2 or 3 because they have no clue what it is; I mean, I think that as they get older it influences them more—like around 10-12.

H: That’s a very good point. It’s not as big an issue when they are little, but when they are getting into pre-teen . . .

A: Yeah, getting into pre-teens—I think that is when they start noticing and want to fit in, trying to be popular, that type of thing. I think that is where this comes in.

H: Do you think that there is something that we could do that could help that?

A: Some of these videos I think are appropriate in terms of being honest and truthful, but some of these videos are just in it for money and I just think that maybe that’s what they are trying to do—is influence the generation, but I really can’t say what we could do.

A: I think they are doing it for the money.

H: What kind of music do you like?

A: Country music.

H: Any particular artist?


H: Any more comments about videos?

A: Again, with this type of music, it doesn’t interest me.

H: What about the country music videos, do you think that they are alright?

A: Some of them I think are a whole lot better than these—their videos—are not what I would see influencing. Some of the songs; they criticize losing their wives, drinking and all that other good stuff, but I just don’t think it’s as bad as this stuff.

H: You don’t think it’s as bad? Why not?

A: I just don’t see our generation of kids listening to country music because it’s boring, it’s not upbeat and it doesn’t have a beat to it—so they are not going to listen to it; that’s why I see most of our generation following this type of music and influencing them because the beats good and then they listen to the words, and then they see the visual and it’s a whole dif
APPENDIX D
DESCRIPTIONS OF PARTICIPANTS

Note: Each participant was given a pseudonym to maintain privacy and each transcript was assigned a letter for coding purposes.

A: Baby is a white girl who is 16 and has two children. She is living in a foster care facility for at-risk teen girls. She has just finished her GED, works full-time, and hopes to regain full-time care of her children.

B: Katie is a 15-year-old black girl who is an outspoken leader of her community. She is in 11th grade, plans to join the armed forces, and has a large family that closely watches her behaviors. She is prone to fighting and loves to dance.

C: Carol is black, 16 years old, and a lover of books. She is in 9th grade, plays sports, and wants to attend college. Carol lives in a foster care facility with 18 other teen girls.

D: Sunshine is a black 17-year-old in the 11th grade who also lives in a foster care facility. She works part-time, attends school, and is already planning her college career. Sunshine is prone to fighting with her peers.

E: Kelly is a black precocious 11-year old in the 6th grade who tends to get into trouble. She defies authority and is often suspended from school. She is enthusiastic and competitive. She attends an afterschool program for latchkey children.

F: Pooh Bear is black, 18 years old, in the 10th grade, and living in a home for unwed pregnant teen girls. She is determined to make a good life for her daughter, and plans to get married to the child’s father and move to the Northeast United States.

G: Scrappy is 17 years old, black, and has been expelled from high school. She is living in a foster care facility and has no plans for the future. She loves to play drums and watch music videos.

H: Julie is white, 17 years old, and in the 12th grade. She lives with other teen girls in a foster care facility. She has one child and hopes to attend college. She is temperamental and starts fights with her peers. She plays softball for a high school league.
I: Smooches is a white 14-year old living in a foster care facility, along with her sister, Pimp. She is in the 9th grade and has difficulty with studying. She is shy and defers to her sister, who has been taking care of her for several years.

J: Rita is 14 years old, black, and lives in a foster care facility with other teen girls. She is in the 9th grade and loves basketball and dancing. She is prone to fighting with her peers.

K: Shadae is a precocious black 12-year old in the 6th grade. She lives in a low income neighborhood and attends an afterschool program for latchkey teen girls. She excels in school and often helps her peers with schoolwork.

L: Pimp is 17, white, in the 11th grade, and lives in a foster home for teen girls. She takes care of her sister, Smooches, and was caring for two other siblings before the State of Florida took them all under custody. Pimp plans to finish high school, and gain custody of her siblings when she graduates and turns 18. She hopes to attend college, but is concerned about finances. Pimp is extremely responsible and mature, although she wishes for an easier life.

M: Red is 17, white, and pregnant with her first child. She is living in a home for unwed pregnant teens, and just finished high school. She plans to live with the child’s father in Florida, and hopes to attend college.

N: Shantai is an observant black 13-year old who is in the 8th grade. She and her sister, Shakayla, attend an afterschool program for latchkey teen girls. She plans to attend college and already has plans for gaining scholarships.

NN: Shakayla is a playful 11-year old who is in the 6th grade. She is black and argues with her sister, Shantai, about everything. She also attends the after-school program.

O: Susan is pregnant, black, and 17 years old. She is in a high school program for pregnant teens and hopes to attend college. She lives with her mother, but hopes to move in with her boyfriend soon after the baby is born.

P: MOA is pregnant, white, 17 years old, and recently graduated from high school. She lives in a home for unwed teens and plans to move back in with her parents soon after the baby is born. She also hopes to attend college.

Q: Spanky is pregnant, white, 17 years old, and in the 10th grade. She resides at a school for unwed teen mothers. She hopes to graduate and move back in with her parents.

R: Diamond is a thoughtful 12-year-old black girl who is in the 6th grade. She attends an afterschool program for latchkey teens. Her mother keeps close watch on her, and insists that Diamond will finish high school and attend college.
S:  Pecan Rican is an outspoken and thoughtful 18-year-old Puerto Rican in the 11th grade. She is pregnant and hopes to finish high school and attend college. Pecan believes strongly in the power of education and would like to be an advocate for teen girls. She lives in a home for unwed teen mothers.

T:  Dreux is a spiritual and shy black 12-year old in the 6th grade. She has a twin sister and is quite emotionally close to her family. She is extremely helpful and respectful to adults. She attends an after-school program for latchkey teen girls.

U:  Cath is a white 13-year old in the 7th grade who was initially raised in South Africa. She is precocious and quite intellectual for her age group. Cath plans to attend college and is already looking for scholarships. She attends an after-school program for latchkey teen girls.

V:  Rose is a white and pregnant 17-year old in the 12th grade. She has professional dance training and would like to pursue that career again. She is finishing high school at a school for pregnant teens. Rose lives with her boyfriend and hopes to attend college.

W1:  Renee is a 17-year-old black girl in the 12th grade. She is planning to attend college. Renee attends an after-school program for at-risk teen girls.

W2:  LaTrae is a 14-year-old black girl in the 7th grade. She is shy and is not sure of any future plans. LaTrae attends an after-school program for at-risk teen girls.

W3:  Ramona is a 17-year-old black girl in the 12th grade. She rarely watches music videos and was astonished to see some of the footage. Ramona is planning to attend college in Florida and has already been accepted into two schools. Ramona attends an after-school program for low income at-risk teens.

AA1:  Tiara is an outgoing 13-year-old black girl in the 8th grade. She attends an after-school program for low income at-risk teens. She is quite outspoken.

AA2:  Rachel is a quiet, black, 17-year old in the 11th grade. She defers to her peers and is uncertain about her opinions. She is from a low income household and attends an after-school program for at-risk teens.

AA3:  Allie is an outspoken 16-year-old black girl in the 10th grade. She is potentially an outstanding community leader. Teachers in the after-school program she attends recognize this trait and are nurturing her abilities.

AA4:  Denise is a 13-year-old black girl in the 8th grade. She has an exceptional scholastic record and plans to attend college. Denise is outspoken and perceptive about her environment. She attends an after-school program for low income at-risk teens.
AA5: ZaShelle is a charismatic 17-year-old black girl in the 12th grade. She is already a community leader. She is quick to share her opinion and sets the tone for a group. ZaShelle plans to attend college. She attends an afterschool program for at-risk low income teens.

AA6: LaTonia is a shy 13-year-old black girl in 8th grade. She defers to her peers, but will also share opinions when prompted. She isn’t sure about future plans, except to finish high school. LaTonia attends an after-school program for at-risk teens.

BB: Sally is a black, 12-year old in the 6th grade. She is shy and uncertain about her opinions. Sally, Kelly’s cousin, tends to fight with her peers. She attends an afterschool program for latchkey teen girls.

CC: Angel is an outgoing white 13-year-old in the 7th grade. She is a latchkey teen who is having trouble staying focused on school. She plans to attend college. She is not involved with an afterschool program.

DD: Sister is an outspoken white 13-year old in the 7th grade. She plans to attend college and is already involved with a scholarship program. Sister is from a low socioeconomic background where parents were rarely present. She now lives with a maternal aunt. She attends an afterschool program where she helps care for younger children.

EE: Neasha is a shy, white, 11-year old in the 6th grade. Neasha lives with her grandmother, who is highly protective. Neasha loves watching music videos and learning about adult trends. She has no plans for the future. Neasha attends an afterschool program for latchkey teen girls.
APPENDIX E
SAMPLE PHOTOS OF PARTICIPANT BEDROOMS

Following are examples of the photographs taken by three respondents of their bedrooms, including their beds and the musical performers they have displayed on their walls. Their beds display their favorite clothing or other belongings.

Figure E-1. Photo taken by Denise, age 13, of her bed, which displays her favorite stuffed animals.

Figure E-2. Denise’s bedroom wall displays the musical artists Booj and B2K
Figure E-3. Photo taken by Shadae, age 13, of her bed, which displays her favorite clothes, stuffed animal, and musical artist Nelly.

Figure E-4. Shadae’s bedroom wall displays musical artists JaRule, P Diddy, Usher, B2K and Ludicris.
Figure E-5. Photo taken by Diamond, age 12, of her bed, which displays her cut-out fashion doll clothes and other toys.

Figure E-6. Diamond’s bedroom wall displays musical artists Beyoncé, Destiny’s Child, Mario and JaRule.
APPENDIX F

DESCRIPTIONS OF MUSIC VIDEOS

Following is a description of the three music videos used in the 2004 study. The descriptions are in the order in which the videos were shown to participants. The lyrics for each song can be found at www.lyrics.com or www.ezlyrics.com.

1. Artist: OutKast
   Song: “The way you move”
   Album: Speakerboxxx/The Love Below
   Length of video: 5 minutes

   This video opens with a scene of women in bikinis and high heels working as mechanics in an automobile garage. One girl suggestively holds a drill, while another woman’s legs are “wiped off” with a rag by one of the singers. The two fully clothed African-American male singers talk with one bikini-clad woman, who then leads them off the set. The scene then changes to a dance ballroom with African-American, Caucasian and Hispanic men and women dressed in black and white formal dress dancing to the song. This scene becomes the main backdrop for the remainder of the video.

   There are several cultural visual references throughout the video, such as when the two singers “fight” with laser beams (referencing the movie Star Wars); when girls in bikinis walk through a large field laden with wild animals (referencing the movie The Lion King); and when a man floats down to the dance floor with the assistance of an umbrella (referencing the movie Mary Poppins).
Many of the visuals are symbolic of sexual fantasy, such as when four women are dancing around one man or when three women are standing in bikinis around one seated and fully clothed male. The women dance around the men, whisper in their ears and touch them suggestively. There are several close-up camera shots showcasing the women’s buttocks and breasts. The video closes with another scene of the automobile garage where the male singers are dancing with the bikini-clad female mechanics.

2. **Artist:** Beyoncé  
   **Song:** “Me, myself and I”  
   **Album:** Dangerously In Love  
   **Length of video:** 4 minutes

This video is a story about the break-up between an African-American heterosexual couple told from the woman’s point of view. The visual background is fairly dark in tone and the story is played out in a large mansion. Beyoncé changes her hair style three times and has four costume changes, indicating that the story takes place over a period of time.

Many symbols of emotional change are used throughout the video including Beyoncé cutting her hair, taking a bath, packing a suitcase, removing make-up and driving away. Other symbols used to demonstrate the change in the relationship include Beyoncé looking through the man’s wallet, finding another woman’s panties, smoking a cigar as she waits for the man to return, violently confronting the man and writhing painfully on the floor.

The video footage is run in reverse, perhaps also signifying change or recognition of mistakes. The video begins with the end of the story, as Beyoncé walks through a garage with car keys in her hand and then drives away in a Mercedes Benz coupe. Reversing the tape footage is a storytelling technique that both confused and interested viewers.
3. Artist: Missy Elliott  
   Song: “I’m really hot”  
   Album: This is Not a Test  
   Length of video: 3 minutes

   This video is a dance-off between several groups, who are identified by the color of their costumes. There are several different ethnic groups represented in the video, including Asians, Caucasians and African-Americans. Several young child dancers are also featured in the video, and their dance moves are tightly choreographed.

   The background is dark, and the set gives the impression of a dock warehouse with boxes set up everywhere, poor lighting, smoke and dark brick walls. There is a burned out hotel sign, where the only letters that work spell out “hot,” reflecting the song’s theme and title, “I’m really hot.”

   Many difficult dance moves are depicted as the dancers respond to each other’s moves. Missy Elliott is predominantly featured in the video. She dances with all of the groups and sings about how “hot” she is as a music industry commodity.

   There are several symbolic scenes that denote gang interaction. These symbols include fireworks, flashlight beams in dark alleys, young men running and angry gestures. There are references to current Asian pop culture movies, such as fighting while hanging from ropes, flying through the air and neon signs depicting Asian words.
REFERENCES


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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Helena Angell is an educator and consultant whose primary interests involve studying the effects of media on society. She began her career in communications in 1980 after completing a B.S. in journalism at the University of Florida. Helena then spent 14 years as a public relations practitioner, specializing in community events and campaigns for nonprofit organizations in Atlanta, GA, San Francisco, CA, and throughout Northeast Florida.

After receiving a Master of Arts in Mass Communication in 1986 from the University of Florida, Angell began teaching communications classes in higher education. She taught advertising, public relations, and mass media courses for over 10 years throughout the Northeast Florida region. Her most rewarding teaching job was as a visiting assistant professor for 5 years at the University of North Florida in Jacksonville, Florida.

Helena returned to the University of Florida in 2001 as a Ph.D. candidate in the College of Journalism and Communications. Her primary focus was teaching media literacy, which she believes is an important component of 21st Century literacy skills. Her dissertation focused on what music videos teach at-risk adolescent girls. Working with these young women inspired Helena to continue exploring issues related to youth and media use. She plans to continue teaching media literacy in community, business, or scholastic settings.
Miss Angell is also a real estate investor in St. Augustine, Florida, where she owns and rents residential and commercial properties. She is an active member of the community, and has volunteered for a number of animal and human rights organizations. Helena loves the outdoors and often runs on the beach with her standard poodle.