A Qualitative Action Research Project Documenting Student Perceptions of the Effects of Visual Culture on Identity

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A Qualitative Action Research Project Documenting Student Perceptions of the Effects of Visual Culture on Identity
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Abstract

I have conducted a qualitative action research project focusing on student perceptions of the impact of visual culture on teens including popular media. Students especially in high schools are bombarded with visual imagery through various technology sources. While working with high school juniors and seniors I noticed a rise in teen pregnancy and sexual confusion among this population. I wondered how much their exposure to sexually explicit imagery effected their identity and choices.

I started off planning research through a feminist and engaged pedagogical lens, specifically adhering to bell hook’s (1994) principals of “holistic teaching”, which focuses on emotional as well as curricular needs of students (p. 20). I documented the study through the use of a field journal in which I kept copious notes during class and individual discussions. Students filled out questionnaires, kept a reflective journal, and created artwork, all of which served as documentation of my findings.

My goal was to find what these perceptions of visual culture and popular media are; how the use of text and narrative could help teens reflect on personal issues, and to discern how teens feel about the portrayal of their generation in the media. Before conducting this research I presumed that the promiscuity shown in media outlets that are geared toward teens was a true reflection of what a typical teen would seek to emulate. This is not the case with the students in this study. According to this group, teens are not nearly as promiscuous as they are depicted in popular media. That stereotype does exist and some are more influenced by what they see than others, but students made it clear that they felt this was not the norm.
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Chapter I: Introduction

Narrative

I recently took a job supervising study hall at a local charter school in a city in Western New York. My job according to the principal who hired me consisted of watching over between 15-20 students in the school cafeteria while they silently do homework and other assignments for various classes. Within the first two weeks I realized I would be doing more than watching students silently doing work.

Sitting on the stage of the school cafeteria and auditorium, I became involved in an unexpected dialogue with a small group of students. I knew most of them through substitute teaching at this particular school over the past three years. During that time a sense of trust and respect developed between us. Those students shared similar characteristics that would immediately be apparent to teachers. They were quiet, reserved, and somewhat withdrawn from the usual banter and disruptions of the average high school. They would talk to me about an assignment, a problem with another teacher, or something exciting coming up.

Every morning I arrived in the cafeteria before the students to set up my space on the stage. During my first study hall, I attempted to engage in some form of work, assuming that I would have plenty of free time while my students worked quietly. I was wrong from the onset. The first group of students came bounding in and I was surrounded. They wanted to know whether I would be there every day and whether I got the job as their study hall teacher permanently.

As surprising as that was to me I was even more shocked, although I tried to hide it from my students, when they began to express concerns about the sexual habits of
friends. During the first weeks of school one student, I will call him John, asked to go to the Counseling Center. As usual I asked why he needed to go in an effort to avoid burdening the already over-worked counselors who were busy with scheduling. His answer was candid and honest. John wanted to sign up for The GSA, The Gay Straight Alliance. I signed his pass and he was on his way. Other students sitting around me casually questioned whether this student was gay or not. Trying to be very diplomatic, I reminded them that The Alliance is for both homosexuals and heterosexuals and that if he wants to address his sexuality with us, it would be up to him. The next day in true high school fashion one student, I will call her Amy, leaned over, elbowed John, and asked point blank “Are you gay”? John didn’t miss a beat in answering that he was. He recently made the decision to come out.

Within minutes I became privy to the sexual orientation of each student in the small group sitting around me on the stage. A handful of students said they were lesbians; there was a gay male, and a few straight students, both male and female. What shocked me were the comments that came next.

One of the straight girls, I will call her Jane, looked around at her fellow classmates and said that she could care less if they were gay or not because many of them had been out of the closet for years. What really bothered her was that a specific group recently had all “come out” together. Jane and many of the rest of the students did not believe that members of this group were actually lesbians; they were questioning the group’s identity.

I knew the group of whom Jane was speaking. I taught them as a student teacher; they were in seventh grade then, now in tenth. At that time the entire grade level was a
constant challenge for me. This particular group specifically challenged all of their teachers. As a student teacher I recognized that these students were not getting the attention they needed to help them make healthy decisions; but with 800 students and so few classes, I didn’t see how I could make a difference.

I remember hearing appalling things that happened in corners of the hallways. Students had been caught by teachers in sexual situations hiding in corners of the building, or being seen on camera sneaking into dark rooms and closets. The students would get detention and suspensions, and the school would move on with business as usual. When I was a student teacher I heard the names over and over again in reference to these situations. These same names were the ones being whispered across a cafeteria table in study hall almost four years later.

After hearing the other student’s comments one of the girls looked at me shyly and quietly explained that this group of sophomore girls has already slept around with a lot of the guys in this small school and now they decided that they would be lesbians. The conversation bordering on gossip had to be focused on those who were present.

I dismissed their coming out all together as a support system suggesting that they were afraid of what others would think and asked the students present when and how they came out. The present group all had stories about not believing that love had to be limited to a man and women and how they feel that they are more open to more types of relationships, suggesting that more than a few of them are bi-sexual. A few of them could not remember the specifics of their coming out. They “just kind of knew” they were gay; others from their peer group knew they were gay, and life went on as usual.

A few weeks later a quiet well-mannered girl, I will call her Anna, with a
beautiful Puerto Rican accent came bounding into class one morning with a “Guess what Miss?” rolling off her tongue. Anna was pregnant and could not have been more delighted. I inquired of her plans for school. Anna naively gave me all the answers. She would have help from her mother, graduate early from high school, and attend nursing classes at a local community college. Despite the fact that she was motivated to continue her education and pursue a career, she just turned 16.

Following Anna’s pregnancy whispers of about four more pregnancies where buzzing through the building. Then staff was notified via email that a senior boy (I will call him Ryan) and his 15-year-old girlfriend gave birth to a baby boy. He took two weeks leave from school to acclimate himself to fatherhood. He is 17.

About a week ago, Amy came to school and sat right next to me in study hall. She was unusually quiet and seemed sad. I always told her that if she needed to talk that I would listen. But if she were not comfortable with that I would send her to the counseling office if she wanted. Tears started pouring down her cheeks and she told me she had some regrets over things she had done in the past and over the weekend.

That past weekend Amy had slept with a former boyfriend and thought it was a mistake. She went on to explain that she does this a lot. She sleeps with boys who have girlfriends or with boys with whom there is no chance of a relationship. She told me she is afraid to get close, but feels disgusted when she does these things. I asked if she where in counseling and she told me she was. Amy explained that with or without the complicated sexual behavior, she feels that counseling is good and that everyone should have someone to talk to. I didn’t know what else to say. I asked if she was safe and if she had been tested for STD’s and pregnancy. Then I told her that the kind of behavior she is
engaging in could seriously compromise her goals. Knowing she is driven, I thought I could appeal to her logical side.

Sitting in my study hall listening to these student’s problems, I questioned how these issues could be addressed in the art classroom. According to the students, they receive a few days of sex education in science class in middle schools and a week in high school health class. A week of sex education is not enough to help student make healthy choices given the inundation of provocative imagery in their everyday life. I was left wondering whether the art room would be a good place to supplement their education of such issues.

Research has shown that studies in media literacy in the classroom can have a positive impact on teen’s perceptions of what they are seeing daily (Pinkleton, Wientraub-Austin, Cohen, Chen, and Fitzgerald, 2008, p. 468). Media literacy is an area that naturally lends itself to the art room. In response students problems I wondered how sensitive issues like sexuality, identity, and body image could be addressed through art lessons in order to better educate teens and help them make decisions that are physically and psychologically healthy.

In her book *Teaching to Transgress* bell hooks (1994) says that “the learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred” (p.13). This statement in particular reflects my own motives for this research. I feel that the learning that will result from documenting this action research project will help students, and that type of outreach to me is sacred.

**Statement of the Problem**

At the charter school where I have been working for the past three years I have
noted the increase in teen pregnancy. I have also become aware of inappropriate sexual situations taking place in public places such as the school park in addition to social networking sites and texting or “sexting”. In addition to the promiscuity of some teens at this school, I have noticed a population of female students jump back and forth between gay and straight relationships. They demonstrate little understanding of what they want in a relationship or who they are. I feel that the promiscuity and sexual confusion of this insular population gives cause for intervention in order to help students make choices that are physically and physiologically healthy.

In addition, sex education programs in this Western New York School take a sterile scientific approach to teaching facts and statistics regarding sex, pregnancy, and STD’s. This sterile model does not address issues related to sexual orientation and does not provide teens with needed information, thus youth cannot transfer what they have learned when caught up in the moment.

Furthermore, research shows that on a daily basis teens are bombarded with sexual imagery that normalizes unsafe sexual behaviors, a rate of at least 4.6 times per hour according to Pinkleton, Wientraub-Austin, Cohen, Chen, and Fitzgerald (2008, p. 462). According to these authors students often become sponges that absorb this content and internalize it as normal without the tools to decode the messages or question whether these behaviors are right or safe for them (Pinkleton, et al. 2008, p. 463). Without decoding tools this imagery has the ability to shape teens identity and influence the decisions they make in their personal lives.

Integrating media literacy and visual culture in the art room might help student’s develop tools to address issues of sexuality and identity. My research will examine this
curriculum in practice, and determine how this type of intervention might provide how critical thinking tools for students.

**Purpose of the study**

The purpose of this study is to discover whether a curriculum that focuses on media literacy and visual culture taught in an art classroom can help teens make healthier choices. In addition I will examine teen’s awareness of the effects of visual culture prior to lessons and after to (determine how certain decoding tools might be used). My hope is that by openly addressing these cultural and social issues, these students will have information that will lead to choices that will sustain both physical and mental well being.

**Research Questions**

- What are student’s perceptions toward the impact of visual culture on teens including popular media?
- What is involved in teaching an art lesson that critiques visual culture and popular media in a school that teaches to the test?
- How would studio production that includes text and narrative regarding impact students understanding of personal issues?
- What can I learn to better inform my understanding of how teens perceive popular media?

**Significance of the Problem**

Given the onslaught of sexual content teens are faced with in media and from peers in their daily lives, they are in need of mechanisms to decode those messages. I believe that the development of their personal identity separate from that of peers and
media portrayals of what is “normal” could play a role in shaping decision making and critical thinking skills. My hope is that through development of these skills teens will have the tools to make decisions that will foster a healthy mind and body.

My prediction is that by taking a more holistic student-centered, social-issues approach to art teaching, teens can have visual literacy tools to help them to understand themselves in relation to outside influences and how these influences affect their decision making processes. Through documenting these processes I hope teachers will find strategies that will help them teach youth facing personal issues related to teen identity. I feel there is a need for dialogue and art making that will address teen pregnancy, STD’s, and confusion among teens who might identify as gay or bisexual.

**Vocabulary**

- **Identity**: In the review of literature I use identity to describe an individual feeling that according to Myers (2006) gives a sense of self worth (p. 366).

- **Visual Culture**: While visual culture can have multiple meanings in this paper I use the term to encompass all aspects of student’s visual world. This includes but is not limited to television, websites, artwork, advertising, and print media.

- **Media Literacy**: This term describes an individual’s ability to read the overt and hidden messages within media and other forms of media (Pinkleton and Weintraub-Austin, 2008, p. 465).

- **Sexuality**: Depending on the context of its use, this term includes individual means of sexual expression and sexual understanding within all forms of sexual relationships including straight, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, and questioning (Rosenfeld-Halverson, 2010, pp. 665-667).
- Empowerment- I use empowerment to describe the result of discovering tools to develop an individual identity. When a student has a feeling of well being they experience control over who they are and who they become. In addition they experience control over situations (hooks, 1994, p. 20).

- Holistic Teaching- Holistic teaching addresses the whole student with a goal of not simply to present information, but also to bring about a deeper understanding of information in addition to creating connections to their lives (hooks, 1994, p. 20).

**Limitations of the Study**

One limitation of this action research project is the very specific population. The charter school is a kindergarten through 12th grade school where many of the students have been in school together since elementary level, thus creating a unique dynamic. They exist in a microcosm of the bigger world in a somewhat sheltered existence within the buildings they occupy. This study can only reflect the views of this unique population. In addition to the limited population the length of the study will be a limiter.

**Conclusion**

With the recent rise in teen pregnancy, the confused sexual behaviors of some young teens, and confusion regarding their sexual identity, I want to find out whether curricular intervention through studies in art and visual culture may better address student’s socio-cultural needs. Through my research I hope to document whether the study of visual culture in relation to these issues can help students understand how their decision-making might be affected by media influences. Through answering questions about student’s perceptions, what the art class would look like, and what teachers could
learn from this research project I hope to provide better understanding of why art educators need to teach media literacy in the classroom.

In chapter two I will focus on topics that establish foundations for this action research project. Through better understanding of cognitive and physical development of teenagers I hope to reveal the need for research in the visual arts that delves into sexuality and identity of teens. In order to examine a need for such a focus on identity, I must better understand how teens develop identity and what factors influence this development. In addition to understanding the influences on identity, I hope to learn about already proven tools that assist in such development and how these tools can be implemented in the art room.
Chapter II: Review of Literature

Introduction

In the high school where I have been teaching, students have expressed confusion and concern in relation to who they are with regard to their social and how sexual roles in everyday life. It seems that in addition to the confusion of forming a complex identity, these teens have trouble making discerning decisions as individuals. Teens are influenced by a variety of factors that impact their personal choices, among those being media.

According to Myers (2008), influences come from a variety of media sources that provide youth with a social script (p. 366). In the following sections I examine the formation of teen identity in relation to sexuality within cultural, media, and peer influences. As mentioned in chapter one I attempt to find out how creating art might help high school students work through making important choices.

First I look at levels of development in teens, specifically what research says about identity development. In addition I compare how researchers have viewed development of sexual identity in teens and examine how these views have changed over time. Lastly I will look at what research has show as effective tools to help teens make more informed choices and how these interventions can aid in their identity development.

Cognitive Development of Teenagers

In order to better understand how teens form individual identities, I explore research on cognitive processes, social development, and sexual development. According to Gray (2010) cognitive processes related to information processing, strategic thought, labeling of specific emotions, and rationalization take place in a part of the brain called
the neocortex (p. 56). Gray states that in adolescents the neocortex is not fully developed which makes it difficult for students of this age to process information presented in verbal form only (Grey, 2010, p. 57). The parts of the neocortex that are developed include those involved in emotional reactions, kinesthetic, and visual learning.

Ladin-L’Engle, Jackson, D. Brown (2009) found that early adolescents’ susceptibility to initiating sexual intercourse dealt with issues of cognition related to sexual debut in pre-teens and teens (p. 97). In the past, Jessor and Jessor (1975) found initiation of sexual intercourse correlated with other behaviors such as drug use and drinking (p. 474), while Ladin-L’Engle et al. (2009) found sexual debut informed by a number of environmental, behavioral, and personal factors (p. 102). Ladin-L’Engle et al. (2009) assessed cognition through the use of a rating system that proved reliable in determining adolescent’s susceptibility to smoking cigarettes to determine whether adolescents may be susceptible to initiating their first sexual intercourse (p. 99). Ladin-L’Engle et al. studied two focus groups and found susceptible teens often showed early physical maturity, increased desire, higher self esteem, and believed that more of their peers were sexually active than actually were. In addition these teens had weaker connections to parents, school, and community (2009, pp. 97-105). Students who feel marginalized by the desire for sex or sexual attractions that society views as counter to normal are often searching for an identity (Rosenfeld-Halverson, 2010, p. 637).

Psychological theorists publish information regarding the adolescent and teenage stages of development. Vander-Zanden, Crandell, and Crandell (2007) explain the teenage years as a period of storm and stress, a period of turmoil, bad judgment, tension, and rebellion among other factors (p. 412). Children of this age go through many
extremely rapid changes that lead to differing views of their self-concept or identity (Vander-Zanden et al., 2007, p. 412). Restructuring of identity helps adolescents better understand why they make the choices they make (Vander-Zanden et al. 2007, p. 412).

Erikson (2007) broke up human development into stages stating that identity development in young people takes place in the fifth stage of development, describing identity as a group of traits that once acquired, allows a person to have a sense of well being (Vander-Zanden et al. 2007, p. 413). Traits include being at home in one’s body, assuredness of anticipated recognition from those who matter to the individual, and a sense of knowing where one is going (Vander-Zanden et al. 2007, p. 413). In addition to these traits, numerous factors contribute to self-concept. Expansion of one’s social circle, sexual contacts and roles, moral and ideological commitments, and breaking from adult’s authority also contribute (Vander-Zanden et al. 2007, p. 413).

Ryckman, Robbins, Thornton, and Cantrell (1982) described that humans who perceive themselves as superior social beings are more likely to engage in more adventurous physical activity and riskier sexual behavior due to the fact that they also perceive themselves as having more control over situations (p. 891). Ryckman et al. (1982) measured perception of self as superior based on the development of the Self Efficacy Scale, the purpose of which is to determine the way that subjects viewed themselves in relation to their social circumstances (Ryckman et al. 1982, p. 891). These views are “based upon the gradual acquisition of complex social, cognitive, linguistic, and physical skills through personal or socially mediated experiences” (Ryckman, Robbins et al. 1982, p. 891). In other words those members of society who feel they excel in areas of interaction with others are more likely to take risks due to high levels of self esteem, feelings of physical skill, and feeling of control.

Vander-Zanden, Crandell, and Crandell (2007) used Erickson’s research to show that adolescents must somehow assume new roles and come to terms with these roles. In addition they must come to terms with themselves and their environments (2007, p. 413). One danger in Erickson’s model is that one will fail at achieving the goal of identity development: that youth may form a negative identity or negative feelings of self worth and self-concept, or a deviant identity or one at odds with the values of mainstream society (Vander-Zanden et al. 2007, p. 414). These findings seem to correlate with what Ladin-L’Engle et al. described as high risk.

Research on the cognitive development of high school students is helpful in understanding the process of identity development in teenage students (Grey, 2010, p. 56). Cognition is not the only factor that influences the development of identity in high school students. In the next section I look at the cultural, peer, and media influences that can impact the development of sexual identity of teenagers.

Sexual Identity Development of High School Students

Sexual identity is just one facet of identity but to teenagers going through complex physical and psychological changes sexual identity can be a source of anxiety and make teens self-conscious as noted in the following. In addition to cognitive development there are a number of cultural, peer, and media influences that can shape teens view of what they perceive as normal sexual behavior (Valle, Roysamb, Sunby, and Klepp, 2009, p. 478).
According to Ryckman et al. (1982) subjects who reported having high levels of physical ability exhibited less self-consciousness and anxiety and shared a similar body type (p. 898). This data suggests that members of society, who display higher self-esteem and a mosomorph body type, having well defined muscles and large bones, are more likely to take sexual risks (Ryckman et al. 1982, p. 898). This research suggests that teens that share this body type may experience less anxiety with regard to sexual activity and may be more likely to engage in sexual acts.

According to Pinkleton, Weintraub-Austin, Cohen, Chen, and Fitzgerald (2008), every year 34% of females under age twenty get pregnant unintentionally (p. 462). “Each year approximately 4 million adolescents contract a sexually transmitted disease” (Pinkleton et al., 2008, p. 462). These statistics represent data specific to the United States where teen pregnancy rates are higher than any other western nation (Pinkleton et al., 2008, p. 462). These statistics do not include the number of teenage males who father children each year. These statistics suggest that understanding why teens make decision to engage in sex acts is important in order to help them make healthy decisions regarding sex.

A variety of influences determine teen's motivation for engaging in sex and these view change with culture. Jessor and Jessor (1975) found the transition from virginity to non-virginity is a way in which youth establish independence (p. 473). Other factors described as motivations for sex were “being capable of interpersonal intimacy, of having gained peer group respect, of being physically attractive, of having affirmed one’s sexual identity, of having rejected social conventions, or of having engaged in personal and socially unacceptable behavior” (Jessor and Jessor, 1975, p. 473). Jessor and Jessor
explain that teenagers who are still finding who they are possibly view engaging in sex acts as a means to discover and establish the above traits as a part of them (p. 473). Jessor and Jessor, (1975) do not explain the reasons why society views teens engaging in sex acts as “unacceptable behavior” (p. 473).

Jessor and Jessor (1975) studied two groups of teens over a four-year period; within each group of adolescents who made the transition to non-virginity at an earlier age, all exhibited a set of similar traits (p. 479). According to Jessor and Jessor (1975) these traits included high value on establishing their independence, a lower value and expectation for achievement, tolerance of behaviors that were not social norms, friends agreed with their views, parents did not, were less religious, and engaged more in deviant behavior rather than participate in church or school (p. 480). Jessor and Jessor (1975) did not define their use of the word deviant nor what constitutes a deviant behavior. They seem to explain it in comparison to non-deviance such as teens who are engaged in church and school. Teens that were perceived as deviant were more likely to make the transition from virginity to non-virginity than those who are not perceived as deviant (p. 480). Both teens and society have changed since this study was conducted and these ideas are contradicted by more current research.

Jessor and Jessor’s (1975) idea of deviance as an indicator of early non-virginity aligns sex with problem behavior and contrasts with more contemporary ideas about sex and teens. Researchers in education have found a more liberal style of teaching kids about sex to be more effective. A New York Times editorial, that reviewed research on the effectiveness of abstinence only education, suggested that “teaching abstinence can delay the start of sexual activity among inner-city youth if it is freed from the moralistic
overtones and idealistic restrictions that were the hallmark of abstinence-only education” (2010, p. 20). This approach suggests that instead of aligning sexual activity with other problem behavior, teachers might use a more logical approach with teens to have a more profound affect (2010, p. 20). Teaching adolescents that sexual activity is not wrong when they are both physically and mentally prepared, and teaching them about proper contraceptive use resulted in more teens waiting to have sex (2010, p. 20). The New York Times refers to a study of two groups of teens in which one had traditional abstinence education and the other the more liberal class (2010, p. 20). After two years, one half of the teens in the traditional group were engaged in sex compared to only a third in the liberal group (2010, p. 20).

In addition to the social, environmental, and developmental factors listed by Jessor and Jessor (1975), and Ryckman et al. (1982), others have found media and visual culture as a major influence on adolescent behavior. In the following section I will look at research that indicates how factors within visual culture effect and perpetuate various behaviors with teens.

The Influence of Cultural Factors on Teens

Some views of accelerated sexual activity and negative identity development site media influence as a key contributor. Myers (2008) explains how television affects human thinking and influences decision-making processes (p. 366). Myers (2008) described the idea of “desensitization” as repeated viewing of emotionally arousing material that extinguishes the emotional (p. 366). Myers (2008) suggested that television gives us a “social script” to follow in everyday life (p. 366). In other words what appears on television is perceived as normal behavior and gives cultural cues as to how people
should act socially. This “altered perception” might be one of the more negative influences of television (Myers, 2008, p. 366). The fictional world has the ability to shape how the viewer perceives the actual world around them and how they act on it (Myers, 2008, p. 367).

Pinkleton et al. (2008) conducted a study documenting how media literacy education influenced adolescent’s attitudes toward portrayals of sex in the media (p. 463). When surveyed, 86% of teens reported they couldn’t name a single positive sexual role model (Pinkleton et al., 2008, p. 463). In television programming popular with teens, sex related material and situations appear 4.6 times per hour (Pinkleton et al. 2008, p. 463). In the United States the amounts of sexual content increased from 56% in 1998 to 70% in 2005, a majority of which perpetuates sexual stereotypes and provides little information about risk or consequences of sexual behavior (Pinkleton et al. 2008, p. 463).

In a survey three out of four teens explained that what they saw on television normalized sexual behavior in real life (Pinkleton et al. 2008, p. 463). In this way television influenced their behavior and directly affected their sexual practices in real life, suggesting that teens are following what Myers (2008) called the “social script” provided by television (p. 367). Subrahmanyam and Greenfield (2008) felt that the main concern regarding media absorbed by teen viewers is how it effects their psychological development, specifically how it affects their real life relationships and their own feeling of well being (p. 125). The way in which media presents what is normal leaves teens with little understanding of how to determine what is normal for them as individuals (Pinkleton et al. 2008, p. 463).
According to Subrahmanyam and Greenfield (2008) television is not the only way adolescents receive sexual content (p. 120). Online communication has become the dominant way for children to receive information (Subrahmanyam and Greenfield, 2008, p. 120). New ways of communication include instant messaging, e-mail, texting, social networking sites, blogs, video sharing sites, and interactive video games (Subrahmanyam and Greenfield, 2008, p. 120). According to Subrahmanyam and Greenfield (2008) the majority of teens who reported using online communication to interact with existing friends felt closer within these specific relationships (p. 126). Another positive effect of the media especially the Internet is that adolescents who are not comfortable asking questions about sex and sexuality have access to an enormous amount of sites that can answer these questions for them (Subrahmanyam and Greenfield, 2008, p. 132). Online outlets gives teens who might feel they would suffer disapproval for their sexual feelings, such as the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender adolescents anonymity, which allows them to express themselves freely without anxiety or fear of negative social repercussions (Subrahmanyam and Greenfield, 2008, p. 132).

Although there are positives to online communication among teens, Subrahmanyam and Greenfield (2008) find the negatives can be harmful both mentally and physically (p. 134). Communication with strangers online can lead to sexual solicitation from adults and sexual exploitation (Subrahmanyam and Greenfield, 2008, p. 134). Cyber bullying can have lasting psychological effects on youth and with little ability for adults to monitor the interaction, it can go quite far resulting in many negative repercussions (Subrahmanyam and Greenfield, 2008, p. 127). These negative aspects of online communication also provide adolescents with a “social script” that can affect how
they view themselves in relation to society (Myers, 2008, p. 367). Therefore these researchers find that mass media can be a major influence on both choices teens make and the development of their identity.

In addition to media influences, another major influence effecting teens is their relationships with peers. Whether online or face-to-face, adolescent relationships and interactions are known to affect the choices they make (VanOss-Marin, Kirby, Hudes, Coyle, and Gomez, 2006, p. 76). In a longitudinal study conducted with middle school students from 1997 to 2000, researchers explored the connection between adolescent relationships and sexual debut and activity. VanOss-Marin et al. (2006) found associations between seventh grade relationship status and eventual sexual activity in the ninth grade (p. 76). Understanding these associations can help better inform adults as to how to help teens make healthy choices with regard to sex (VanOss-Marin et al., 2006, p. 76).

According to the study, youth involved in committed relationships may be more likely to involve themselves in higher risk sexual activity (VanOss-Marin et al., 2006, p. 77). Many teens reported experiencing coercion to have sex and often report that their first time was unwanted or non-voluntary (VanOss-Marin et al. 2006, p. 77). In contrast Ott, Millstien, Ofner, and Helpern-Felshner (2006) explained that not all adolescent sexual activity is the result of negative influences (p. 87). Ott et al. (2006) found that majority of adolescent’s desire intimacy, pleasure, and social status, and feel they could attain these goals through sexual activity (p. 87).

Valle, Roysamb, Sundby, and Klepp (2009) examined other determinates of sexual intercourse among 15 and 16 year olds (p. 479). They found that teens with
negative body image and a tendency toward depressed moods were associated with early sexual debut (p. 6). The same study found that those who felt supported by family and teachers, in addition to having strong motivation toward future goals, are likely to abstain from sexual activity (Valle et al., 2009, p. 6).

In general, research that compared the identity development and sexual development of both female and male youth showed similar determinates. Giordano, Longmore, Manning, and Northcutt (2009) focused specifically on male identity and how it affects their sexual promiscuity (p. 1814). Giordano et al. (2009) examined Elijah Andersons' (1989) theory regarding the player identity (p. 1814). In 1989 Anderson observed that poverty among blacks encouraged sexual promiscuity as a specific masculine identity trait called being a player (p. 1815). In addition to Africa Americans the player identity has been adopted by a wide range of male youth. No longer reinforced by the poverty in predominantly black neighborhoods it has been perpetuated by popular media, the player identity has become something of a badge of honor among teenage boys (Giordano et al. 2009, p. 1817).

A player is defined by Giordano et al. (2009) as having had an early sexual debut, a high number of sexual partners, reports cheating, and engages in hook-ups or non dating sexual behavior and one-night stands (p. 1815). Giordano et al. (2009) stated, “Identity statuses are not viewed as particularly consequential, but merely provide labels or names to describe the behaviors involved” (p. 1815). In other words although males may engage in the behaviors that define a player, they may just be conforming to the label provided for them. They may also be acting according to the influence of friends with more liberal sexual attitudes (Giordano et al. 2009, p. 1816). Giordano et al. (2009)
also observed that many young men could gain this label regardless of whether they actually engage in the practice of being a player (p.1820). Often males who gain this reputation without engaging in the sexual activity associated with it exhibit flirtatious tendencies in socially visible situations (Giordano et al. 2009, p. 1820). The player identity for males is about status and is perpetuated by both peer and media influences (Giordano et al. 2009, p. 1821).

Giordano et al. (2009) defines identity as having “a slippery, elusive quality” (p. 1821). Identity is important for adolescents as a tool for organizing who they are within a society and often influences their decision-making behavior (Giordano et al. 2009, p. 1821). According to research teens are subject to a number of socio-cultural factors that affect their behavior specifically the decisions they make. In the following section I will look at what teachers can provide as tools to aid students in teen understanding of the above factors and how educators can help teens make healthier choices.

**Tools for Discovering Identity**

In this section I look at bell hook’s ideas of engaged pedagogy and holistic teaching which is a proven strategy for addressing sensitive issues with teens in a school setting. In addition I will examine various practices such as narrative and the use of contemporary art to aid in understanding of visual culture and its effect on high school students.

In her 1994 book *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks described transgression as “a movement against and beyond boundaries” (1994, p. 12). hook’s (1994) "engaged pedagogy" is expressed as a combination both of conventional critical theory and feminist theory (p. 15). The basic framework of hook’s theory focused on teacher’s
commitment to their own self-actualization in order to empower their students (p. 20). hooks calls this kind of teaching holistic, where teachers grow with their students and through the growth of knowledge bases both teacher and student become empowered (pp.15-21). The perception of teacher support and being empowered by a holistic education can create a more inclusive classroom (hooks, 1994, pp.15-21).

Engaged pedagogy according to hooks (1994) took from both feminist and critical theory the connection between idea and life, which this was originally a feminist cornerstone (p.15). Using the holistic teaching described by hooks, many of the turbulent issues experienced by adolescents can be addressed (p.15). Holistic teaching can have the ability to address ideas that matter to students and can foster what Erikson calls a sense of well being (Vander-Zanden, et al. 2007, p. 413). hook’s encouraged educators to use what is current and relevant in student’s lives to help students relate knowledge to personal experience (1994, p. 20). Research shows that the relevant issues hook’s is speaking of are, in sex education, teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (Ladin- L’Engle, et. al. 2009, p. 97).

Ament (1998) explained that in feminist art theory the exploration of societal values is examined through how they are reflected in the art of that particular time (p. 59). Similar to how modern media reflects the values of our society, so does the contemporary art of today. Nadaner (2010) suggested the use of artists in teaching who delve into the current trends in society and through this exploration students question those trends (pp.128-134). Rowland (2002) suggested a technique for staying abreast of what matters to our students. She called it “check in” and explained that often giving students a moment to reflect on what is happening in their lives results in teaching
moments and “a forum for discussion of choices” (pp. 188-189). The study of media literacy in an art class could provide such moments.

In a society where marginal groups are often left out of popular media it can become difficult when youth identify with groups such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ) (Rosenfeld-Halverson, 2010, p. 634). Often these groups face judgment in the form of harassment (Rosenfeld-Halverson, 2010, p. 634). Rosenfeld-Halverson (2010) suggests that those who find themselves in the margins of society found a dramaturgical process helpful in sorting out identity issues that can develop when there are no positive examples in their everyday life (p. 635). Rosenfeld-Halverson (2010) defines the dramaturgical process as “the telling, adapting, and performing of personal stories” (2010, p. 637). The research describes two ways in which the dramaturgical process aids identity construction - first through telling personal stories in a group setting, and second through the creation of complex characters and adaptation of each other’s stories (Rosenfeld-Halverson, 2010, p. 644). The result of story telling is often the chaining or linking of stories, which highlight issues that are important to a specific community, and in turn legitimizes the issues and those telling the stories (Rosenfeld-Halverson, 2010, p. 648-653). Through this process Rosenfeld-Halverson (2010) found that the youth with who she worked regularly challenged stereotypes that are usually associated with sexual identity labels (p. 657). According to Halverson a sexual identity does not completely define who a person is (2010, p. 657).

Through storytelling, youth share their individual experiences and together develop what Rosenfeld-Halverson (2010) described as a “common cultural narrative” (p. 653). Creating an environment of what Rosenfeld-Halverson (2010) called co-
development allowing the individuals involved to better understand social categories and place themselves within a category (p. 660).

Rosenfeld-Halverson (2009) suggested that narrative and specifically the dramaturgical process can help individuals make a difference in the way marginalized groups identify within social categories as well as how they are perceived in relationship with groups viewed as more mainstream. Rosenfeld-Halverson (2010) contends that this process is not limited to the LGBTQ society but can be useful with other marginalized youth such as African Americans and economically disadvantaged youth (p. 663). For all these groups, incorporating these processes into classroom practice can be empowering and a tool for youth to understand their own identity (Rosenfeld-Halverson, 2010, p. 663).

Rosenfeld-Halverson’s research was specific to the LGBTQ. Research dealing with youth identity development for those who are being raised by parents who identify as LGBTQ can also be useful to teachers. Istar-Lev (2010) addressed the development of gender identity in these homes (p. 273). According to her research children reared in homes with LGBTQ parents are generally psychologically stable (Istar-Lev, 2010, p. 273). According to Istar-Lev

Human beings develop in patterned, epigenetic ways, and gender and sexual development are considered one core part of the normative maturation for children. Gender identity is paradoxically presumed to have a naturally unfolding quality, and at the same time is something that must be taught and achieved. (2010, p. 278)
If this were true it would make sense to expect children who grow up in LGBTQ households would be taught to hold the same gender identity as their parents. Istar-Lev (2010) also examines an assumption that gender identity is something that develops naturally according to one’s sex (p. 278). Gender identity however does not always develop in accordance to a subject’s natal sex, or the gender in which you are born (Istar-Lev, 2010, p. 279).

Often youth who may not identify with their assigned gender do not see others like them represented in media or any form of visual culture (Subrahmanyam and Greenfield, 2008, p. 129). The art room is a good place to incorporate artists with whom students can identify, such as Rosa Bonheur, Romaine Brooks, and Hanna Gluckstien. According to Lampela (2001) all three artists defied gender roles of the 19th and early 20th century by dressing in pants instead of dresses which was the norm at the time (p. 45).

Gender identity and gender role are sometimes perceived as the same yet according to Istar-Lev (2010) they are different all together (p. 279). Gender identity is a part of an individual’s core sense of self and gender roles are adaptations of socially constructed markers (Istar-Lev, 2010, p. 279). In addition to discrepancy in media portrayals of gender roles as indicated by students in chapter one media also sends signals regarding ideal body type. Nadaner (2002) cites artists that can be used to counter act how media portrayals of the body influence youth’s perception of themselves (p. 226).

Nadaner (2002) focuses on how media portrayals of the body can affect the development of adolescent identity. According to Nadaner (2002), “We get many of our ideas about the body through images in print and electronic media” (p. 226). Media has a profound influence in shaping the reality we live in, therefore in the case of adolescents
what they see on television, they see as reality (Nadaner, 2002, p. 226). Where they get
their ideas about how they measure up to portrayals of strength, gender identity, sexual
attractiveness, become part of the identity children assume (Nadaner, 2002, p. 227).

Nadaner (2002) suggests that in the art room the use of contemporary artists that
address identity and media messages could help students become more than consumers of
such messages (p.128). The goal is through artists such as Barbara Kruger, Cindy
Sherman, and Lorna Simpson students can explore stereotypes in relation to their own
self-concepts. He also references painters Lucien Freud and Jenny Saville as useful in
exploring a variety of body types (2010, p. 128-134). In addition to the use of artists
Nadaner (2002) suggests writing as a way for students to form images based on emotions
that convey a sense of self (p. 235). As stated earlier by Rosenfeld-Halverson’s (2010)
use of narrative as a means to explore individual ideas of self, Nadaner implements
poetry as a tool to explore identity (2002, p. 235). Use of artists and narrative or poetry
according to Lampela (2001), Istar-Lev (2010), Rosenfeld-Halverson (2010),
Subrahmanyam and Greenfield (2008) can be helpful tools in the art room. In addition
media literacy lessons in the art room can help students make healthy decisions.

Pinkleton, Weintraub-Austin, Cohen, Chen, and Fitzgerald (2008) studied
separate groups of high school students and first year college students who participated in
a media literacy course. The lessons “were largely interactive and included lessons about
health risk associated with sexual activity and lessons in which students created their own
media messages” (p. 465). Pinkleton et al. (2008) used this model for lessons to help
students develop knowledge about the process of creating different forms of media, the
primary goal being to enhance understanding regarding misrepresentations of reality that
are commonly encountered in the media (p. 465). In their research Pinkleton et al. (2008) used surveys to obtain information on how teens understood a number of criteria including awareness of media influence, awareness of sex-related myths on television, desirability, efficacy, expectancies, perceived teen norms, attitudes toward abstinence, and media literacy evaluation (p. 467-468). The data revealed that the adolescents who received media literacy training were more likely to have more realistic estimations of teen sexual activity and felt they were better able to delay their own sexual debut (Pinkleton et al., 2008, p. 468). In addition, teens felt that sexual activity was less likely to provide social benefits. Teens who participated were better able to identify sexual myths within media outlets and thus viewed sexual imagery as less desirable than they did prior to the study (Pinkleton et al., 2008, p. 467). The researchers found the media literacy lessons encourage critical thinking skills and taught them something new (Pinkleton et al., 2008, p. 469).

Rettig and Rettig (1999) examined the implications of art lessons on the cognitive development of art students. Rettig and Rettig (1999) explained that when information connects to student’s emotional sensibilities they are more likely to recall the information (p. 20). Art allows students to make use of multiple senses. When education is multisensory it becomes more accessible than one stored in a single sensory area (Rettig and Rettig, 1999, p. 22). Another implication is the way the arts promote self-direction and allow students to teach themselves and each other (Rettig and Rettig, 1999, p. 22). The ability of the arts to allow social learning or working with each other to solve problems is another; art encourages pattern finding which later makes information retrieval easier (Rettig and Rettig, 1999, p. 22).
Research suggests that teens are at a unique stage of development that should be considered when teaching this distinct group. Changes faced by teens regarding their physical and psychological development effect their behavior and decision-making. In addition there are various social, cultural, and media influences that influence teen’s choices seeking ways to aid teens in decoding these influences. Through critical analysis of these factors teens can develop tools for healthier decision-making. In this chapter I have examined what researchers have discovered concerning teens and choices. In chapter three I will use what I have learned to plan strategies to find how the study of visual culture can aid students in making healthier decisions.
Chapter III: Design of the Study

Research Paradigm

Qualitative research is described by Marshall and Rossman (1999) as a broad study of social phenomena; its various genres draw on multiple methods of inquiry (p. 148). “Action research has as its goal to address a specific problem within a specific setting, such as a classroom, a work place, a program, or an organization” (Merriam, 2009, p. 4). The goal of this qualitative action research study was to document student perceptions of the effects of visual culture on identity.

According to Merriam (2009) the goal of critical research is critique and challenge in order to transform and empower society (p. 24). I hope through teaching a lesson on critical analysis of visual culture students will begin to question socio-cultural roles. Merriam (2009) advises researchers to “seek to not just understand what is going on, but also to critique the way things are in the hopes of bringing about a more just society” (p. 35). In my research I intend to discover whether critique of visual culture helps high school students make healthier choices.

Setting

The Technical Institute is a small charter school located on the border of a quiet suburban town near a small city in western NY. The school sits on a main trucking route close to the industrial part of the city. Located on the same street are waste management facilities, a recycling plant, and an automotive stamping plant. The school itself was once a factory that manufactured airplanes. Because of its industrial past the buildings are divided up into sections that at one time housed separate warehouses, which have since
become home to a separate elementary, middle, and high school. Specifically my research will take place at the high school.

Across the street from the school are rows of quiet city streets lined with small single-family homes. Students can be seen walking to school from these homes each morning. This riverfront neighborhood consists of mostly lower middle-class families. Near the school are two parks where students often congregate after school.

A few blocks away from this lower middle class section of the city is a white-collar suburban neighborhood. The schools border location allows for a uniquely mixed population of students from the suburbs, inner city, and rural areas. Students who attend The Technical Institute have been in school together since kindergarten and this history has created a close knit community of peers.

School rules and discipline are strictly enforced with unchanging guidelines regarding consequences. Students are expected to comply with the dress code which includes a school polo shirt, black pants or skirt, black dress shoes, shirts buttoned to the top, and no visible jewelry. Despite the strict rules and un-waiving enforcement of dress code, the students seem to thrive on the structure provided. They know exactly what is expected of them daily and what will happen if they do not comply. At the same time this structure, a kind of hand holding, may have kept them from understanding outside influences and consequences that are not so clearly defined.

On an average day one can encounter groups of students moving between classrooms chatting loudly and “hanging” out at lockers. In the art room students gather around large worktables with the radio blaring a new hit tune. Students in the art room are responsible for retrieving their own materials from an over-stocked supply closet.
Those enrolled in photography or digital arts programs work in their own private Mac lab. A recent addition, the Apple computers are for art department use only and are equipped with brand new flat screen computers and wireless mice. A smart screen at the front of the room allows the whole class to see what is on each individual screen at the teacher’s discretion. When one walks in the room it is usually darkly lit only by the purple glow of computer screens. It is a sterile atmosphere and teachers are not allowed to hang anything on the walls, which creates an institutional feel. The computers are equipped with the necessary software to aid students in completing their art projects. This as setting is the site in which I will complete my research project using several data collection methods.

**Data Collection Methods**

Data will be collected first through observations of class discussions and the keeping of a personal field journal, documents including student’s artwork, student’s reflective journals, and questionnaires. By documenting and examining I will be following Merriam’s (2009) suggestion that observations be done of activities and interactions, conversations, researcher’s behavior, and various other subtle factors (p. 121).

As a participant observer I will keep a personal reflective log of my own observations in a field notes journal. Students will be assigned reflective journals used to keep a narrative of events in and out of class. This log will serve to provide insight into their opinions and ideas. These texts according to Merriam (2009) are analyzed in order to discern meaning on the part of the author of each (p. 32).
Merriam (2009) uses the term document to refer to written, visual, digital, and physical materials that may be relevant to the study (p. 139). Because this study will be conducted in an art classroom, the artwork created from the lesson plans that inform the artwork will serve as researcher-generated documentation of students understanding. According to Merriam (2009) documentation can verify emerging hypotheses, advance new categories and hypotheses, offer historical understanding, and track change and development (p. 155). The artwork generated will allow me to understand both where student’s ideas come from and how they change throughout the research study.

As with any research conducted with human subjects there is the possibility of affecting those subjects’ lives. In order to reduce any risk to subjects through the above data collection methods ethical issues must be addressed.

**Ethics**

As in any classroom situation the presentation of controversial material may elicit strong emotional reactions in some students. Subjects might reveal a past or current potentially harmful situation to which they have or may in the future be exposed. In this case school professionals such as guidance and social service teams will be contacted.

As in any qualitative research, pseudonyms will be used to assure student participants and locations are kept anonymous. All student documents, observations of participants, and artwork will be coded to assure anonymity. All collected data and records from this research project will be stored safely in my home for a mandatory three years in compliance with federal regulations outlined by the approved IRB form from Buffalo State.
Creswell (2003) explains an informed consent form as acknowledging that participant’s rights have been protected during the data collection process (p.64). The first step will be to receive approval from school administration, followed by the approval of the classroom teacher. In addition I will seek approval from participant’s guardians and from the participants themselves. Due to the sensitive material being presented in this classroom setting school support staff will be contacted if any issues arise.

**Limitations**

One limitation to this study is the small and very specific population. The charter school is a kindergarten through 12th grade school where many of the students have been in school together since elementary school. This creates a unique and insular school community. They exist in a microcosm of the bigger world in a somewhat sheltered environment. This study can only reflect the views of this unique population.

In addition to the limited population, time restraints are more limiting than originally planned. Instead of my own graphics art classes at the Technical Institute I will be working with a cooperating teacher using her advanced graphics class. I have been limited to teaching one lesson with this group which will only give me a glimpse into the ideas that I originally would like to have studied.

**Conclusion**

Through qualitative action research methods I will study the perceptions that teens foster in relation to the introduction of a lesson on visual culture with a focus on but not limited to popular media. I will document these perceptions through observation of class discussions, personal field journal entries, student’s reflective journal entries, and student artwork.
My hope is that, even with all limitations taken into consideration this study will serve as a jumping off point for further research. The study of visual culture through the eyes of teens and understanding their perceptions of popular media give us as art educators another door to understand and reach our students.
Chapter IV: Results of the Study

Driving down the long main street that connects my apartment building to the Technical Institute my stomach is in knots. Since planning and designing my research project, budget cuts have eliminated my position. This observation will be my first time back in the building.

I keep thinking, “Could I have found a different site?” I could have but these youth inspired me last fall and it would not seem prudent to execute my project with students I hardly know. This group inspired the topic for my research and they should be the ones to weigh in on my findings. So I pull my car in the lot, shift the gear into park, and take a deep breath.

In revising my plans to execute this research project, a fellow member of the fine arts department stepped in and allowed me access to her advanced graphics class as my research group. As I looked over the class list the night before, I smiled at the familiar names including students with whom I have been teaching for three years now. With these students I built a trusting relationship, and many were present during that study hall over a year ago giving impetus to my research. Thinking back, my nervousness subsides.

As I reached for the buzzer and opened the door, all fear subsided. Students were transitioning and I was greeted warmly by two girls from last school year. Many students smiled as they passed or shouted “What’s up” from a distance down the hall. The faculty was equally cordial everyone wanted to know what I was doing there, they seemed excited to have me back even for a short time.

I sat in the office waiting for the computer arts teacher Ms. V to make her way from the middle school. While I waited the new vice principal, our former fine arts lead,
plopped down on the bench next to me. Brad was full of questions about my research and happy I choose to continue focusing on their students despite the situation.

By the time Ms.V arrived, I was calm and excited; the nervousness subsided and I remembered what was important - students. I could hardly wait to get started. But today would be an observation day.

As the students entered the dimly lit computer lab they expressed excitement too. Their excitement only served to fuel my own. I stood in the purple computer light with a broad smile, pen and pad in hand, ready to begin.

The room itself is an awkward set up. It is a slight rectangle with two poles at the center; they are the remnants of a wall that divided the room. Two long horizontal rows of computers take up most of the central part of the room. At the back wall are four shorter rows of computers facing the opposite direction. Two floor-to-ceiling windows on the far exterior wall fitted with blinds remain closed to prevent glare on the massive flat screens. The classes never turn on the over-head fluorescent lights; they prefer the soft glow of the screens. The calm cool room is like a sanctuary in their loud bustling high school.

Once the students are seated at their computer the rest of the class along with the rest of the school fade away. Behind the massive screens they are shielded from each other and are pretty much in their own world. The huge Mac flat screens dominate their entire field of view.

The lab has strict rules enforced by the technology support and development staff. This department is made up of computer and technology specialists who are not certified teachers and have no student contact unless they are called to a lab to fix something
during class. The technology support and development department used their own grant to fund the new Mac lab and make it very clear that the equipment in the room belongs to them. The teachers who share the lab are responsible for enforcing the department rules. The five teachers who use the lab are responsible for anything that happens within the room and are under constant video surveillance while teaching their classes.

The kids who use the room understand how stressful it is on the teachers. They see the atmosphere in the room change when the technology department enters the room. Without fail there is usually a list of things that the teachers do to compromise the equipment and in turn the students often deal with a changing and inconsistent laundry list of “don’t.”

It was the second week of September when I showed up for my first observation. At this point students were three weeks into the quarter and had already completed one project. They were starting a short pop art lesson that was meant to familiarize them with the many tools of the Photoshop program. That week the teachers were asked to no longer use pencils and paper in the lab, Ms. V was in middle of battling this new rule. She explained that creating art is a process with many necessary steps that come before they start working on computers. Using the defense that artwork doesn’t just magically appear and expressing the need for brainstorming, she won this round.

Starting Out

At the beginning of this process I felt the need to assess the influence of visual culture on students at the high school level. I am interested in how much of teens individual identities have unknowingly been influenced by popular culture. What I ended up with were student’s perceptions of popular media on themselves and their peers.
Through questionnaires, my reflective filed journal, student’s reflective journals, and student’s artwork I came to three main categories; forging your own path, male and female exploitation and stereotypes in popular media, and the use of narrative to elaborate ideas.

**Initial Questionnaire**

I gave students a short anonymous questionnaire that was used to gather information to determine how much and what kind of media imagery, within visual culture, the group was exposed. As previously discussed in chapter two, Subrahmanyam & Greenfield (2008) express both negative and positive effects of teen exposure to different media outlets (pp. 120-134).

In question one student’s were asked to identify two favorite TV shows. Answers ranged from sports broadcasting to music hit lists. Three out of seven students listed *Sponge Bob* as a favorite and expressed that they enjoy the “silliness” and “humor.” Two out of seven listed *Family Guy* as a favorite; other answers included *Glee, Rugrats, Seinfeld,* and *Bad Girls Club.* One student listed *Untold Stories of the ER* and *Mysteries of the ER* as favorites and expressed an interest in the medical field.

**Table 1: Television Viewing Habits**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Television Show</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sponge Bob Square Pants</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sienfield</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Guy</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Untold Stories of the ER</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mysteries of the ER</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rugrats</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glee</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bad Girls Club</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>106&amp;Park</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Question two asked for students to list regularly visited web sites. Every student listed at least one social networking site as a favorite. Facebook was the most popular listed by seven out of seven students followed by Twitter listed by three out of seven students and Tumbler listed by one out of seven students. Three out of seven students listed more than one of these sites as frequently visited.

In addition to social networking sites students expressed a ranging interest in their choices when browsing the Web. YouTube was ranked highly with three out of seven students listing the video viewing site in their top choices. Other sites that were listed by students included ESPN, Google, Yahoo, shopping and music video sites.

Table 2: Internet Sites Visited

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Internet Sites</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facebook.com</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youtube.com</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Google.com</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empire Sports Network.com</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shopping sites</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music sites</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yahoo.com</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tumbler</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funnyjunk.com</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In question six students were asked to list whether they had any number of the following: television set, video game systems, computer, and cell phone with data package. Every student has all of the above at home. Answers reviled students have more than five TV’s, more than two video game systems, and more than one computer.

Question seven of the questionnaire asked how many hours per day students spent using the above technology. Students listed six hours as the minimum amount of time
spent online, texting, in front of the TV, and playing video games. One student said that, depending on the day, they may spend every hour that they are awake doing one of the previously listed activities.

Table 3: Students Access to Technology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technology</th>
<th>Number of Homes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Television</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video Game Systems</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computers</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cell Phone with Data Package</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As stated in chapter two when surveyed 86% of teens reported they could not name a single positive sexual role model (Pinkleton et al. 2008, p. 463). Question five in my own questionnaire asked students to list five people they viewed as role models. Two out of seven students listed no role model which translates to 28.60% of the group that I surveyed. Four out of seven students had a family member in the top spot—mothers, brothers, and grandparents. No one listed a father as a role model. Other role models include rap stars like Jay Z and Wale (Wah-lay), sports star Derek Jeter, fashion mogul Kimora Lee, and President Obama.

In the initial questionnaire (questions one, two, five, six, and seven) were asked in order to understand how much visual culture permeated the lives of high school students and in what way. Questions three and four were asked in order to get a better idea of how students perceived the effects of visual culture prior to any discussion.

**Initial Student Perceptions**

During the initial session students had no prior knowledge of the concept of visual culture literacy. Prior to the presentation of the questionnaire, I had been a silent observer
of their classroom for two weeks. Students were asked to answer honestly and told that I need their true opinions and feelings.

Question three asked how popular brands use sex to sell clothing. Five out of seven students had no answer. The two students who answered associated sales techniques with good looking people not sex specifically. They both explained that the appearance of the model was more important than sexuality in an advertisement.

Question four focused on the way in which teens are represented in media. Students were asked if they felt these depictions were or were not accurate. Answers to this question varied. Students who answered “No” felt that depictions of teens in the media were either idyllic or negative exaggerations.

Four out of seven students felt that yes television and media portrayals of teens had to hold some truth. Reasons for this conclusion were listed as market research as way grownups get an accurate view of the average teen; others explained that everyone is different so the media depiction of teenagers must hold true in some cases. Finally one student explained that teens need to emulate what they see in the media which forces what students called the “teen stereotype” to become a true depiction of an average teen.

These findings contrast with those of researchers in chapter two. Pinkelton et al. (2008) revealed that three out of four teens explained that what they saw on television normalized sexual behavior in real life (p. 463). Answers to question four suggests that teens are critiquing the way peers are following what Myers (2008) called the “social script” provided by television (p. 367). Myers’ (2008) idea of following a “social script” was an idea that resonated through the rest of my time spent with this class.
In the next section I will discuss how student’s reflective journals, artwork, and responses during class discussion all centered around one of two main ideas. The first of which is the idea of following in contrast to the idea of forging your path. The second idea is the difference in the way males and females are portrayed in popular media and how society views them.

**Forging Your Own Path**

Evidence in my own reflective log, student journals, artwork, and questionnaires proved that media stereotypes of high school students can often be misleading to both students and the adults that care for and work with them. While working with this eleventh and twelfth grade class, one of the big ideas that eventually became the theme of multiple student art works is that many media stereotypes are just that, misleading.

We started off our lesson on visual culture and the influence of popular media with a PowerPoint presentation. The students were introduced to contemporary artists Cindy Sherman, Robert Longo, and Barbara Krueger. Nadaner (2010) suggested that the use of artists who delve into the current trends in society, and visually explore and question them, cause the viewer to question these conventions (pp.128-134). I made visual comparisons between their artwork and advertisements for popular brands, images of celebrities, and scenes from popular television shows. We used the images as a spring board for class discussion. At first we looked at and made observations and comparisons without any background on the artist or artwork. I asked questions and we discussed student’s perceptions of the images. The students reflected in their journals and formulated perceptions.
I then showed the students quotes from Myers (2008) and Nadaner (2002); “Television gives us a social script to follow in everyday life” (p. 366) and “We get many of our ideas about the body through images in print and electronic media” (p. 226). I asked them to explain their opinions and interpretations of these quotes. I told them to give their opinion, that there will be no right or wrong answer. Students were then given background on all three artists and information on the concepts they focused on in their art. They were asked to reflect on how their previous ideas had changed or stayed the same given the new information.

Kia is a senior at the Technical Institute and holds an office in her class’s government. Kia has been attending the Technical Institute since third grade. When we started a discussion about visual culture and its influence on teens she was one of the first to speak up.

Like it’s not even about that [sex] if people just did them [were themselves] it wouldn’t be a problem. It’s like some people make their own path and then they can be a positive influence against the media. Kia expressed this view numerous times during discussion. When asked directly if she felt the media influenced her she said “No”, Kia feels that it is up to strong individuals such as herself to influence others in a positive way. According to her, “If they (other students) want to act like fools they are going to mess up their own lives.”

The art work Kia created can be seen in Appendix B and is a commentary on the way a television show that is supposed to have a positive message can be perceived differently by different individuals. *Teen Mom* is a show on MTV a popular channel with young people. The show’s goal is to show teens how difficult it is for teenage girls who
have gotten pregnant to move through life. In her journal Kia expressed that she felt the teenage mothers on the show are now so popular they have achieved celebrity status.

Basically my work is about distorted perception. Basically teens have taken a positive show that was meant to warn girls about teen pregnancy and turned its subject into a trend and the girls into celebrities. It was supposed to show how hard it is for a teen mom but all because it was blown up in the media it is glorifying those girls for making a mistake.

Laura is also a senior. She is quiet during class but can be seen socializing during appropriate times. Laura is athletic and also a member of student government. During class discussions she was quiet. She chose to speak through her reflective journal and artwork (see Appendix B). After our initial PowerPoint presentation and discussion, she wrote that “insecure teens don’t know what to do with themselves and so they find someone to follow and be like. She also stated that people should “realize that the lives of teens on TV are out of whack with reality; they show teens doing way more than we do (sexually).”

The artwork Laura created is meant to encourage her peers to be themselves and do what they feel is right for them. Laura would like to see everyone be comfortable with who they are. When asked to describe her art work she wrote this entry:

In my project I got an ad with lots of people and made everyone black and white except the middle girl and made her colorful. Then I put blindfolds on the girls to show how they should be different. My quote was “dare to be different, not plastic but yourself” Then I put “you are perfect” all around it. I wrote “not plastic”
because today everyone wants to be a Barbie doll and fake but not there [sic] self.

I wrote “your [sic] perfect” because everyone is special in their own way.

Three other student’s artwork and journal entries focused on the idea of forging your own path. These five students expressed displeasure at the way in which the media portrayed their generation. They expressed disgust that grownups were writing shows that depicted teens in explicit situations and that the role of teenagers in media were rarely played by actual teenagers. Michael an eleventh grade student used the word “creepy” in his journal in reference to producers of shows like *Skins* and *Glee*.

The class described those who fell victim to media stereotypes as “followers” and described them as “whack, lame, and pathetic.” Most of the class agreed that if teens could just be themselves, they would be better received by peers. Those who forged their own path were described as “bosses” or “leaders.” Words such as “fierce, confident, and having mad swag” were used in relation to this type of teen.

The students in the advanced graphics class at the Technical Institute feel that their generation is misrepresented within popular media. This particular group has 24 hour access to multiple forms of technology through which they can view visual media imagery. Three out of seven students would choose to watch *Sponge Bob* over more sexually explicit shows such as *Jersey Shore* and *Skins*. However they expressed that the young people portrayed in more explicit shows do influence some of their peers. Despite this fact most of these students would prefer to forge their own path.

Five out of seven students artwork was centered on the idea of being different. Two out of the seven art works focused on the exploitation of males and females in popular media. Even though most choose to use the former as inspiration for their art
work I noticed they all had opinions on media portrayals of men and women and the way in which society reacts to these portrayals. In the next section I will explore how students perceived these media stereotypes through evidence in my reflective log, student reflective journals, student artwork, and questionnaires.

**Exploitation of Males and Females in Visual Culture**

The data in the following section was gathered mostly through an initial PowerPoint presentation that was accompanied by questioning and discussion. Students often expressed opinions about the appearance of the people depicted in each image. Examples of the way students described women and the way they described men were evident in my field notes and student reflective journals; there was a notable difference. In this section I will reflect on this process and the findings.

The last slide of the presentation compared two popular advertising campaigns for Dove a skin care company. Dove’s “Real Women” campaign can be seen in magazines, on billboards, and television depicting women of all shapes, sizes, and skin colors in their underwear and has been recognized as ground breaking and empowering for women. In Sweden Dove’s “Real Men” campaign depicts men of all shapes, sizes, and skin colors in their underwear and has received less media recognition in the United States.

When the class was presented with these two advertisements that share a similar public message about body image, students responded with two very different reactions. Jeff and Jacob were the first to express an opinion. I recorded observations of these responses in my field notes. Shown first the “Real Women” image Jeff, a junior at the Technical Institute and an open bisexual, spoke out about how beautiful all women are. “I think all women are sexy, these women are beautiful and should feel beautiful.” Jacob a
senior spoke a little differently, “Women are women and they’re all hot.” Kia spoke up as well, “It’s not about looks; it’s about how they carry themselves.” She then went on to compare confident women to fashion mogul Kimora Lee. “She’s mixed and a thick woman, she’s not skinny; but she’s fierce and that’s what makes her sexy.”

When I switched the slide to the “Real Men” advertisement the comments and tone of the room changed. Jeff’s reaction was immediate. “Awe miss, that’s just wrong, no one wants to see guys in their underwear.” Jacob described it as something “I don’t want to look at.” It was Kia who gave an alternative perspective. “Miss, it’s different for guys because they aren’t self conscious about themselves, so it’s not the same.”

In journal entries when reflecting on slides that depicted female’s from popular media students used “vulnerable, sexy, easy, seductive, strong, attractive, confident, sex freak, slutty, skanky, desperate, whorish, naive, fierce, hurt, and broken.” When describing men from popular media they used the words “dark, sick, awkward, constrained, and sinister.”

Michael was the only student to question these biases in one of his journal reflections. After looking at one of Cindy Sherman’s untitled film stills, the image of Cindy posed sprawled on a bed with a distant look in her eyes, I used a comparison image of film star Scarlet Johannsen sprawled on a chez lounge. Students described them as appearing “desperate, seductive, and vulnerable.” Michael asked if they could just be comfortable. “Maybe they like lying around and are comfortable with themselves.”

Jamal didn’t speak up too much during class discussions; he is a junior and prefers not to participate in class as often as he can get away with it. He used exploitation of women as the main idea of his final art work (see Appendix D). Unfortunately Jamal
did not complete his final reflection on his own art work but in his early entries he used positive words, “These females look fierce.” His work positioned two runway models in their underwear next to each other. He used Photoshop tools to clothe one of the models making a comparison between the half naked female and fully clothed female.

Keonna a senior chose the same theme of exploitation of the body in media and expressed it through her art work. She altered a Calvin Klein underwear advertisement featuring male models; she clothed one and left the other wearing only boxer briefs. In her journal reflection she expressed her concept.

The meaning of my project is to show how men should be covered up. Naked men make all beautiful smart men want to be like those models. Most men who look like models are jerks. It gives all guys a bad name. Saying they are dumb and only good because of a cute body.

Throughout group discussion there was a difference in which students described male and female gender roles in popular media which I documented in my field journal. Jacob used *Jersey Shore* a reality show on MTV to explain a perceived difference. *Jersey Shore* is about a group of young people who party and “hook up” all summer. Both male and female stars of the series are openly promiscuous often engaging in sex acts on camera. Jacob had this to say about it:

It’s like the girls and guys on *Jersey Shore*, me and all my friends we want to be like the guys. They have swag and get mad girls. The girls on the show though, that’s not right. Girls shouldn’t act like that; it’s slutty [sic].

During discussion students agreed that promiscuity is more acceptable for teen males and is often rewarded by male peers. Students discussed that for females
promiscuity is looked down on and viewed as slutty. Anderson, (1989) described this as the “player phenomena” (p. 1814).

Student journal entries and consistency in descriptive language reflects a society in which sexual expectations are different for males and females. Students described using derogatory words related to promiscuity and reflect negatively on them, the exception being the “boss” or “fierce” women who exudes confidence. Descriptions of men vary depending on who is doing the describing. Many male students are often upset by men posing in their underwear and describe it as “sick” however promiscuity in men is not associated as negative.

In my initial research intentions, I had hoped to incorporate an in-depth use of narrative into the student’s reflective journaling. Because of the change in situation and my having to gather data in another teacher’s class, a thorough focus on narrative would not fit the time restraints of the project. However, throughout the process, I noticed an emerging tendency toward storytelling.

**Narrative as Expression**

Rosenfeld-Halverson (2010) describes the result of storytelling in a group setting as the chaining or linking of stories, which highlight issues that are important to a specific community, which in turn legitimates the issues and those telling the story (p. 648-653). A major part of my field journal entries are stories told by students during class discussion. Students used stories to get a point across and would often build on each other’s stories.

Kia told us the story of a girl who cut herself. During class discussion and in her reflective journal she described parallels between the girl’s life and a character on a
popular television show. When the girls cutting habits stopped, a new vice developed that mimicked that of the TV character.

We all used to watch this show called *Degrassi* and this one girl [a character] was cutting herself. So then this girl we all knew her she was cutting herself and everyone knew. When the girl [character] stopped she started wearing all these rubber bands all up her arm and she would snap them all the time so after that she [Kia’s peer] came into school with all these rubber bands and snapped them.

As her story progressed, Jacob linked his peer group to Kia’s story by expressing how he and his friends would like to emulate cool male characters from popular television shows. The importance of individuality within this school community was the overarching theme of all their narratives.

Throughout the class discussion many students expressed a similarity between what we were doing and what they have done in the past in their English classes. Teaching Studio in Art class last year, I was told to teach the same lessons on the same day as the other art teachers. All lessons where written by Ms. C and contained little discussion, no divergent questioning, no relation to life, and were technique driven. Contemporary artists were only introduced in a museum or field trip setting. The format of this new lesson had students eager to express their opinions, and they expressed excitement that their ideas were going to be taken into account.

In addition to the way narrative reflected and legitimized student’s feelings about forging their own path, I found storytelling to be the way in which students chose to express a point. When asked a question, most students used storytelling to answer it. This response happened naturally when I used divergent questioning techniques.
I used divergent questions in both class discussions and an exit questionnaire that students completed after handing in their artwork. The purpose was to sum up ideas that developed throughout the lesson and assess any change in perceptions. In the next section I will review the data collected from these questionnaires.

**Debriefing**

Although we hadn’t specifically discussed the term identity during the lesson the students described many aspects of it throughout my time in the class. I wanted to see how much they understood about the relationship of visual culture to teen’s identity.

Question one of the exit survey asked students what the word identity meant to them. Students in general described identity as all the parts that make up who a person is. One student summed it up as “a whole persons being, everything that makes a person them. Like their morals, swag, beliefs, and standards.” Another described it as, “The person I am and how I carry myself and represent myself to other people and how they see me,” which focused mainly on identity in relation to how it is reflected by those around us.

Question five asked if students felt that media directly affected teen’s identity. Seven out of seven students answered “yes” that they feel that popular media effects teen’s identity. Students listed several ways popular media did this: popular media changed who teens want to be causing them to emulate what they see and media as a way that teens can see themselves reflected and validate who they are. One student expressed that there are so many different types of teens depicted in popular media that everyone has someone to relate to.
Sexually explicit situations are common in popular media that is meant for teen audiences. Question three asked what they think about this trend and felt that teen sexuality was misrepresented in popular media. One student expressed concern that even though most teens she socializes with are not as sexually active as those depicted on television that those same teens will feel pressure to become more sexual active. One teen said that “I don’t feel pressure but it does or might pressure teens to more sexual things.”

The class was split in opinion when asked if they felt more lessons about visual cultures and its effects would help to curb its potentially negative influence. Two out of seven students felt that their peers would continue to do what they saw in popular media because they would still want to be perceived as cool. Four out of seven felt that it could help by influencing the leaders amongst their peers to be a more positive influence. One student suggested that learning about popular media could help teens by teaching them how to be cool and informing them on current trends.

Conclusion

The data suggests that my initial perceptions of teen behavior at the Technical Institute were not true for the population surveyed at the Technical Institute. In chapter one I found through discussions with students that a group of students were expressing confusion about gender roles and sexuality. In addition I noticed a rise in teen pregnancy during my initial months teaching. I assessed a need to address these perceptions and the impact of what teens were receiving through popular media. After teaching a lesson that focused on this I found that although there are students at the Technical Institute who may need this intervention, the group I surveyed did not as a whole exhibit this need. In chapter five I will discuss how the data reflects these findings.
As mentioned on p.45 of this document the idea of forging your own path rather than mimicking media portrayals of teens was very important to this population. The group also observed the way in which the male and female body were exploited and used sex to sell popular brands. In addition I found that many stereotypes about male and female gender roles held true for this population. Throughout the lesson and during both classroom discussion and in reflective journal entries students used narrative to clarify ideas, legitimize their thoughts, and express what was important to this school community.

After assessing the amount and type of popular media that permeates teen’s everyday life and how often we focused on three contemporary artists and compared the art to images from popular media, the class felt that in addition to the previously discussed main ideas many media outlets exaggerate and idealize the lives of teens through unrealistic characterizations. The group expressed that although these are stereotypes, they still fear that some teens will emulate what is seen; and so the importance of leadership among peers became an important theme. Four of the seven students expressed that they felt those who forge their own path should set positive examples for those teens in need of guidance.
Chapter V: Conclusions and Recommendations

Findings

In examining data and establishing categories of findings in chapter four I determined that through a lesson in contemporary artists and current popular media imagery in the art room, students can begin to express their perceptions of the impact popular media has on teens. Pinkleton et al. (2008) stated that most teens today could not name a single positive role model (p. 463). 28.60% of the group I surveyed listed multiple positive role models. Five out of seven students had a family member in the top spot, mothers, brothers, and grandparents. No one listed a father as a role model. Other role models include rap stars like Jay Z and Wale (Wah-lay), sports star Derek Jeter, fashion mogul Kimora Lee, and President Obama. These findings in this one art class contradict Pinkleton et al. (2008) who specified 86% had no positive role models (p. 463).

Although students have almost unlimited access to visual culture and popular media my data showed they are not all watching sexually explicit content. According to introductory questionnaires most students listed Sponge Bob when asked to list a favorite television show. Cartoons like Sponge Bob Square Pants are favorites of young children, teens, and adults. The silly and sometimes mature humor attracts audiences of all ages. Other shows listed were ones meant to empower such as Glee and 106 and Park, this is evidence that although there are shows geared toward young audiences that focus on sex, these teens appeared interested in comedy and inspirational television shows.

My goal was to find what these perceptions of visual culture and popular media are, how the use of text and narrative could help teens reflect on personal issues, and to
discern how teens feel about the portrayal of their generation in the media. Another goal was to reveal how this type of teaching could help educators be better versed to help students with all aspects of their lives.

Engaged pedagogy according to hooks (1994) took from both feminist and critical theory the connection between idea and life: this was originally a feminist corner stone (p.15). Combined with the holistic teaching described by hooks many of the turbulent issues experienced by adolescents can be addressed (p.15). This is the theoretical framework around which I designed my study. Forming a connection between ideas and life hooks (1994) wants educators to take into consideration the students “whole being” (p. 20).

**Need for Constructivist Teaching**

In chapter four I described the look and feel of the Technical Institute and the computer lab where the advanced graphics class is held. Here I will describe how the lesson played out and the tools I used to create an atmosphere for open dialog. I did not just walk into this class as I did student teaching years ago hoping the students would be the ideal class and answer all my questions truthfully.

In this site, school structure is that of right and wrong clearly defined in black and white terms. Students are educated in a traditional way with the teacher as lecturer and student as note taker followed by studying and assessed with a test. The art department is no exception. There are unit reviews and at least two art exams throughout the year. The only time students get a reprieve is in their English classes where the focus on contemporary literature allows for interpretation and open discussion. This is the only place I have seen divergent questioning in practice within the Technical Institute.
While teaching a lesson at the Technical Institute I assessed a need for what Brooks and Brooks (1993) call constructivist teaching practices (p. 68). According to their research teachers do what bell hooks (1994) calls “holistic teaching” by following these practices (p. 20). Teachers can teach to the whole student by asking students to elaborate on their point of view rather than asking for a right or wrong answer (Brooks and Brooks, 1994, p. 68).

Taking from bell hooks the idea of teaching to the whole student and using principals of constructivism I wanted to allow for their individuality to shine through. I started the lesson with an opening questionnaire where they were told there were no wrong answers, followed by a PowerPoint presentation. Instead of a succession of slides with images and background information the presentation consisted of mostly images allowing student to make their own assumptions and interpretations.

Students where allowed ample time for explanations during class discussion; this is where narrative became important in this class. The students had a natural tendency to use storytelling in order to explain ideas and as Rosenfeld-Halverson (2010) describe as the chaining or linking of stories, which highlight issues that are important to a specific community, which in turn legitimizes the issues and those telling the story (p. 648-653). Through this process of telling stories out loud and writing stories in their journal two emerging themes developed.

**Student Perceptions**

In chapter four I explained the two themes students developed as the importance of forging your own path and the sexual exploitation of both genders in popular media. After looking at my field journals, student reflective journals, and student artwork I think
that the more significant of the two themes is the idea of leading or creating your own path. Five out of seven students used this theme as concept for their artwork.

Before conducting this research I had thought that the promiscuity shown in media outlets that are geared toward teens was a true reflection of what a typical teen would seek to emulate. This is not the case with the students in this study. According to this group, teens are not nearly as promiscuous as they are depicted in popular media. That stereotype does exist and some are more influenced by what they see than others, but students made it clear that they felt this was not the norm.

Through divergent questioning techniques two main themes emerged. In response to the stereotype most the group agreed that teens should not try so hard to be like the idealistic and exaggerated versions seen on television. Kia said “Not everyone is stupid or pathetic enough to follow or mimic what they seen [sic] on a show, I feel that shit [sic] is lame.” Students felt peers should forge their own path and be accepted for who they are. Three of the seven students in the class whom I would classify as leaders within the school community understand they belong to student government, sports teams, and social committees, and expressed they wished more people would stand up and be positive influences on teens. Their confidence allows them to question the less confident of peers, yet not see things from the perspective of someone who may be finding themselves or may be more easily persuaded by peers and popular media.

Another point I observed through discussion and student journals is they way in which students described males and females as seen in chapter four shows that they influenced by double standards common to all age groups. Even as juniors and seniors in high school, males who are promiscuous are rewarded and females who are promiscuous
are shunned. Even when describing strong women, confident females in the class used words like “fierce” and “in charge”, and a few male class members used words like “skanky”.

In their artwork however two students addressed this theme of sexual exploitation of the male and female figure. The two pieces came across as shaming big business for using sex to sell products rather than commentary on male and female gender roles. I felt this shaming had an underlying message, a moral one, and warning of the need to forge your own path.

Student’s art work, my field journal, and student reflective journals express a need for more confident students to step up as positive peer role models in an effort to reject popular media’s influence on teens. In addition the double standards and stereotypes assigned to genders by our society permeate this small school community. This is an indicator that despite hype about female empowerment women’s gender role in general is still society fragile and prone toward negative connotations.

**Recommendations**

Even though females in popular media are often portrayed as strong and forging their own path I have found these students still question their worthiness to do so. I think this way of thinking is a reflection of larger society’s values that have been imprinted on these youth. These ideas are in need of further consideration.

For researchers interested in the effects of popular media on teens’ identity I would recommend a using more time and in-depth curriculum development on the topic of popular media. The time limitation gave me only a slice of what these students had to offer. A larger focus group would allow for more varied results and more emerging
themes that could be explored. If I had my own class at the Technical Institute I would have taken time to speak to, interview, and collaborate with the English department because they are using similar techniques to interpret literature that could be applied to the study of popular media.

**Conclusion**

Overall student perceptions of the affects of visual culture on teen’s identity fall under two themes. I found students focused on gender roles and stereotyping in the media, stating that depictions of teens are either idealized or exaggerated and that double standards regarding male and female promiscuity exist within their social circles. Second, students indicated that teens should forge their own path and live above the influence of the popular media in which they are immersed in. Kia summed it up well in her journal:

People see what is going on around them or what other people are doing and even what their seeing on TV and running with it! Their [*sic*] spending their time mimicking and are lacking identity. Confident people should show them a positive message.

Students in this group want to send a positive message to peers and take on the leadership role to counter external negative influences of popular media on teens. Throughout my research use of divergent questioning and other constructivist practices allowed students to elaborate on their ideas as suggested by Brooks and Brooks (1993, p. 68). By encouraging these ideas and emulating bell hook’s (1994) “holistic teaching” style narrative became a natural way for students to express a point (p. 20).
Reference:


Appendix A

Initial Questionnaire

Please answer all questions honestly for research purposes. Your answers will be kept anonymous.

1. What are 2 favorite television shows and why? I would like to use programs that you like in our upcoming lessons.
   - ______________________________________________________________
   - ______________________________________________________________
   - ______________________________________________________________
   - ______________________________________________________________

2. What web sites do you visit regularly?
   - ______________________________________________________________
   - ______________________________________________________________
   - ______________________________________________________________
   - ______________________________________________________________

3. How do popular brands use sex to sell clothing?
   ______________________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________________

4. Do you think television and advertising accurately depict the lives of teenagers? Explain.
   ______________________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________________
5. List five role models:
   • __________________________________________________________
   • __________________________________________________________
   • __________________________________________________________
   • __________________________________________________________
   • __________________________________________________________

6. How many of the following do you have in your home?
   TV ______
   Video Game System ______
   Computer ______
   Cell Phone with Data Package ______

7. How many hours do you spend using the technology listed above?
   _______________
Appendix B

Kia’s Art

Laura’s Art
Appendix C
Jacob’s Art

Keonna’s Art
Appendix D
Jamal’s Art
Appendix E
Exit Questionnaire
What does the word Identity mean to you?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

How do you feel teenagers today are affected by media influence?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

What do you think about the abundance of sexually explicit content in shows and advertizing that is geared toward the teenage market?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Do you feel that learning about media and how it targets young people can help teens? How?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Do you think that the way in which the media targets young people has a direct effect on their identity?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________