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Negotiating an Appropriate Image: A Visual Analysis of Prom Magazine Editorials

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Introduction

Prom is a rite of passage in American society, a symbolic divide between youth and adulthood. The cultural importance of prom is felt by many young women who report feeling pressure to look and act in a certain manner to be suitable for the occasion (Zlatunich, 2009). Prom is used as a venue to construct and display an ideal feminine identity by adolescent girls. There is pleasure to be gained from interacting with beauty practices to achieve the feminine ideal for prom; however, there is a close relationship between enjoyment in feminine beauty rituals and pressure to engage in consumerism (Zlatunich, 2009). Prom is also one of the first and only times that adolescent girls are able to interact with their feminine sexuality.

Prom magazines create the idea of the “perfect” prom that relies on having the ideal: dress, hair, make-up, date, ect (Zlatunich, 2009). However, girls who read prom magazines are not passive readers; instead they actively negotiate meanings with the contents (Zlatunich, 2009). Dress can be one area for negotiation with the pressures of consumerism and feminine ideals for prom. Rules of formal dress may be rejected by girls who choose to negotiate new meanings from the cultural ideal showcased in magazines; this can be seen in girls who wear tennis shoes as opposed to high heels or girls who purchase dresses at second-hand stores (Zlatunich, 2009).

Therefore, the purpose of this research is to understand the construction of the ideal image for prom through fashion editorials in prom magazines and to describe a method for performing a visual social semiotic analysis of the images within fashion editorials.

Methods and Procedures

One of the few methods of visual analysis that can be qualitative is semiotics. For this research a visual social semiotic (VSS) approach were chosen. VSS allows the researcher “to look empirically at what is in the image,” (Jewitt, 1999, p. 265). When conducting a VSS analysis a researcher must first identify signs which can include: representations of bodies, manner adopted by actors within the image, props, and settings (Rose, 2001). Once signs are determined, the researcher will look for codes of meaning. A code “is a set of conventionalized ways of making meaning that are specific to particular groups of people” (Rose, 2001, p. 88). It is very possible for multiple codes/meanings to be signaled by one sign. However, VSS deals with the preferred codes of signs for the target audience not alternative constructions (Jewitt, 1999). Five steps for performing a VSS were described by Rose (2001, p. 91), and include: (1) decide what signs are, (2) decide what they signify, (3) think of how signs relate to each other, (4) explore how signs connect to codes, (5) return to signs via codes to explore the precise articulation of ideology to the audience.

The sample for this research was comprised of five yearly issues (for years 2011, 2012, and 2013) of teen prom magazines. Only *Seventeen* and *Teen Vogue* produce prom issues so the

sample is representative of the available literature. A total of 20 fashion editorials comprised of nearly 150 images were selected for inclusion in the research.

Results and Discussion

Three themes emerged from the images including: maturity, immaturity, and style negotiations. There was an overall impression of enjoyment and excitement displayed in the editorials, which suggest that there is pleasure to be gained from the elaborate dressing and grooming rituals necessary for prom. Images within the editorials were linked through common settings, themes, and colors. The settings displayed a mix of blank backgrounds, luxurious surroundings like estates, more adult locals like nightclubs, and places associated with childhood such as playgrounds. In addition to setting, color themes such as neon, and pastels were a major uniting factor among the images.

There were numerous elements such as design, color and positioning of models that signified sexual maturity within the sample. Red, which in Western cultures is used to signify sexuality, was used extensively. Other indicators of sexuality were seen in the garments such as open backs, thigh-high slits, deep v-necks, and short skirts.

Immaturity and youth were also signified within the editorials. For example, some models wore their hair in pigtails, a style associated with young girls. A majority of the models were presented as having „natural“ make-up and hair styles associated with youth as it is common for younger girls to wear little or no make-up.

Interestingly, signs indicating both maturity and immaturity were often present within a single image. The presence of both types of signs indicates the complex negotiations made by young women create an ideal prom image.

Lastly, there was a significant amount of visual information related to style and proposed appearances for prom. Some of these suggestions were unexpected, for instance, there were a number of images featuring masculine dress including: black leather combat boots, and tennis shoes. The inclusion of new and different accessories with the formal dress may be seen as a cultural negotiation with the ideal prom “look”. By creating more options appropriate formal dress consumers have more choices for negotiating their own personal style.

Conclusion

The VSS analysis was able to highlight some of the ideals held by girls who are preparing for prom. There were signs related to both maturity and immaturity which were often mixed together in a single image, showing the balance which is made between the two by teens. Other elements were also highlighted, such as the relative enjoyment of the occasion and negotiations of appropriate styles for formal dress.

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