



MEDIA@LSE
Department of **Media** and **Communications**

MEDIA@LSE Electronic MSc Dissertation Series

Compiled by Prof. Robin Mansell and Dr. Bart Cammaerts

Bunny Talk: Teenagers Discuss The Girls Next Door

Jennifer Barton,
MSc in Media and Communications

Other dissertations of the series are available online here:
<http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/media@lse/mediaWorkingPapers/>

Dissertation submitted to the Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics and Political Science, August 2009, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the MSc in Media and Communication. Supervised by Dr. Nancy Thumim.

Published by Media@LSE, London School of Economics and Political Science ("LSE"), Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE. The LSE is a School of the University of London. It is a Charity and is incorporated in England as a company limited by guarantee under the Companies Act (Reg number 70527).

Copyright in editorial matter, LSE © 2010

Copyright, Jennifer Barton © 2010.
The authors have asserted their moral rights.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior permission in writing of the publisher nor be issued to the public or circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published. In the interests of providing a free flow of debate, views expressed in this dissertation are not necessarily those of the compilers or the LSE.

Bunny Talk: Teenagers Discuss The Girls Next Door

Jennifer Barton

ABSTRACT

The sexualisation of the mainstream media is hardly cause for surprise nowadays, even when shows are targeting a teenage audience. The popularity among teens of *The Girls Next Door* (a television series that follows the day-to-day lives of Playboy's Hugh Hefner and his three girlfriends), which broadcasts adult content in a PG manner, provided the basis for this research. I explore the pleasures associated with watching the programme, how teenagers speak about gendered representations in reality TV and how gender roles are constructed on the show through representations of hegemonic masculinity and femininity. Theoretically, this research is rooted in audience studies, which argue for active engagement between viewer and text. This study is also situated within a gender studies framework which explores concepts such as performativity, symbolic violence and postfeminism. Through a combination of individual interviews and text-in-action (Wood, 2005) sessions, I discovered that pleasure is derived for a multitude of reasons, including ideas of authenticity, derision, fantasy, irony and superiority. Furthermore, teenagers are explicit about how men and women should behave, and teenage girls have already trained a self-critical eye on themselves.

1. INTRODUCTION

'We call it a fantasy. They call it home.'

– Tagline for *The Girls Next Door*, uk.eonline.com

The prevalence of reality television programmes, particularly those centring on 'inside looks' into celebrity lifestyles, with a focus on the domestic and day-to-day rituals of the elite, is a worldwide phenomenon. One particular show that has attained enormous success since it first aired in 2005 is the E! Channel's *The Girls Next Door*, known as *The Girls of the Playboy Mansion* in the UK¹ (uk.eonline.com). The programme gives a behind-the-scenes glimpse into the fantasy world of the Playboy Mansion and stars *Playboy's* founder, Hugh Hefner, and his three (now former) girlfriends: Holly Madison, Bridget Marquardt and Kendra Wilkinson. More precisely, it 'exposes the secrets of the Playboy mansion' (uk.eonline.com) and introduces audiences to the lives and interests of the three girls, including their family visits home, frequent party planning and the pursuit of their careers (from *Playboy* modelling to massage school to hosting radio and television shows). Many people already have a certain image of the Playboy lifestyle, courtesy of some background knowledge of the Playboy brand and pop cultural icon Hefner. While the Playboy Mansion is traditionally thought of as the ultimate symbol of excess, often associated with nude, gallivanting buxom beauties and alcohol-fuelled parties (Levy, 2006), this programme paints a picture of innocent giggling girls with pink bedrooms. Considering its close resemblance to a sorority, it is perhaps no great surprise that the show has garnered such a following among teenagers.

While this research is rooted in audience studies and in the pleasures that audiences derive from watching their preferred television programmes, I am also interested in how the show seems particularly popular among female, teenage viewers, who also sport Playboy's extensive range of merchandise (a range of Playboy stationary was recently pulled from WH Smith; Sky News, 11/02/09). While the stereotypical male *Playboy* magazine devotee may find some pleasure in this programme, the emphasis on dressing up, grooming, shopping, exercising and spending time in the kitchen is traditionally viewed as the women's domain. The world that Holly, Bridget and Kendra inhabit, with its pink décor and sugary-sweet girliness, is in fact more of a Barbie land than a bordello, and the show is edited and

¹ *The Girls Next Door* will be referred to as *GND* for the duration of this paper

put together in such a way that it is comparable to MTV reality TV programmes such as *Teen Crips*, *My Super Sweet Sixteen* and *The Hills*, which are geared to a tween/teen female audience and focus on excessive spending, lavish homes and parties, fashion, and attracting the opposite sex. That one of the stars of *The Hills*, Heidi Montag, after undergoing breast implants and rhinoplasty procedures, recently posed on the cover of an edition of US *Playboy*, highlights the crossover between the shows and brands (MTV, 13/08/09).

GND raises a number of questions that are relevant to a study of the media and that can contribute to further media research, by calling to mind earlier audience research studies which focused on the pleasure audiences derive from their favourite programmes and the emancipatory potential of derided TV genres for female viewers (courtesy of theorists such as Ang, Radway and Modleski). In using a postfeminist framework, by way of Stuart Hall's work on the politics of representation, I plan to explore how this programme deals with issues of gender roles, class, bodies and sexuality in a way that recreates gender and class-based stereotypes on-screen. Hugh Hefner himself has stated that *Playboy* and its ilk are being 'embraced by young women in a curious way in a postfeminist world' (Levy, 2006: 5). Drawing on postfeminist theory, I will argue that programmes such as this one are reinforcing stereotypes deemed important in our society (e.g. looking a certain way and behaving in a manner that is appropriately 'masculine' or 'feminine'). As a result, females (both those starring on the show and viewers) have adopted a self-policing narcissistic gaze (Gill, 2003) to keep themselves and their bodies in check and to ensure they are performing the 'labour' of femininity.

The show brings to the fore issues of class and social mobility, gender roles and their performative aspects, hegemonic stereotypes, the disciplining of the female face and body, the sexualisation of domesticity (a specialty of Nigella Lawson's), the commodification of sex, May-December relationships, polygamy, motherhood and the excesses of Hollywood, all packaged within a saccharine-sweet fantasy world. Playing on the notoriety of the magazine, the show promotes the *Playboy* clothing and jewellery ranges (as modelled by the girlfriends in every episode) and also encourages an image of the *Playboy* Mansion as a child-friendly, happy, pro-family environment. It also reinforces the idea to youngsters that a sure-fire path to success can be attained with the right man by your side. Yet the show is pleasurable for those who watch it – and even for those who dismiss reality television programmes as 'trash TV'. This study seeks to examine how pleasure is created and disseminated by the programme, and how these problematic representations are reconciled and discussed by

teen viewers. Ultimately, reality TV shows like *GND* repackage the American Dream using sexual tropes and easily recognisable gender stereotypes to make the process – going from rags to riches, from anonymity to celebrity – seem accessible to anyone.

2. BEHIND THE BUNNY EARS: A BRIEF HISTORICAL GLANCE

'When you look this good, who cares if you're plastic?' – Barbie

Playboy magazine was founded by Hugh Hefner and launched in 1953, organized around the ideas of fun, pleasure and consumption for the middle classes (Gill, 2007). As Ehrenreich (1983) has argued, 'the breasts and bottoms were necessary not just to sell the magazine, but also to protect it' – male effete consumption needed to be reinforced with machismo, because male consumption on its own was threatened with the shadow of homosexuality (Gill, 2007). *Playboy* celebrated its version of a 'natural' male sex drive complemented by innocent 'girls next door' that were happy and willing to please men (Paasonen, Nikunen and Saarenmaa, 2007: 74). As Gill (2007:206) indicates:

...its individualistic, hedonistic, consumption-oriented ethic of personal gratification represented a rebellion against the "old" figure of male as breadwinner and family provider and opened up a space of libidinous fun and lascivious consumption.

In the many years since its founding, *Playboy* has gone through many changes, getting raunchier as the times demanded, straddling the line between porn magazine and consumer lifestyle publication, famed for its articles (where prominent actors and politicians often reveal more than they would elsewhere), as much as for its centrefolds (Acocella, 2006). It is also a problematic site of both sexual progress, thanks to its role in the sexual liberation movement, and constant female oppression, because it reinforces stereotypical, patriarchal representations of women as sexual creatures designed to serve the needs of men. These different sides of the same coin come together in the figure of the Playmate, the magazine's central sexpot who boasts an innocent face paired with a biologically attractive body. For Hefner, the ideal was to have a 'girl next door' who possessed a Shirley Temple face atop a Jayne Mansfield physique (at once suggesting wholesome innocence and unbridled sexuality). This perpetuation of a fairly homogeneous image of attractiveness caused many a law suit in its heyday (Acocella, 2006). The magazine's Playboy Clubs were faced with numerous legal disputes, namely concerning the firing of staff for losing their Bunny image,

which was ranked on a scale ranging from a flawless beauty to loss of image through ageing or an irreversible appearance issue (Wolf, 1991: 19). Thus, while the magazine may have embraced a new kind of sexuality for its time and for women, it was and still is concerned with only certain types of women: the unattractive, ageing or heavy-set need not apply.

The Playboy Clubs have since gone (although one recently reopened in Las Vegas), and our image of Playboy in the noughties is removed from what it perhaps once was thanks to the introduction of a wide array of merchandise (ranging from bed sheets to clothing to pencil cases) and its appropriation by a teen and tween age group. As Gill points out, 'The use of the Playboy bunny icon on clothing, stationery and pencils aimed at the preteen market is but one example of the deliberate sexualization of children (girls)' (Gill, 2007: 257), while Levy (2006: 143) laments that:

The urban youth website Dr. Jay's has rhinestone Playboy bunny thongs with matching camisoles. When the Washington Post asked Hugh Hefner if he was concerned about his company's attire being marketed to teens he replied, "I don't care if a baby holds up a Playboy bunny rattle".

This is a response to the postfeminisation and pornification of mass culture, but it is hardly surprising that girls who have barely outgrown their Barbie dolls would turn to worship real-life versions of their plastic idol. Not only have the girlfriends of *GND* become stars in their own right, but there is no doubt that the Playboy name has become far more mainstream than it ever was before. Despite the financial problems the company may be facing in our current economic climate, as a result of the show's continued popularity, the success of merchandise sales and the amalgamation of Playboy into other aspects of mainstream culture (the girlfriends' appearance in the Nickelback 'Rockstar' video and the *Scary Movie* franchise, the collegiate-themed film *The House Bunny*, about a *Playboy* playmate who becomes a sorority mother, the girls' own merchandise including bobbleheads, books, fitness videos, calendars and spin-off shows, etc.), the brand is now as much of interest to a 12-18 year old female demographic as it once was to older males.

3. THEORETICAL CHAPTER

'If you remove the human factor from sex and make it about stuff: big fake boobs, bleached blonde hair, long nails, poles, thongs, then you can sell it. Suddenly sex requires shopping: you need plastic surgery, peroxide, a manicure, a mall.'

– Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs*

Soap Opera Audiences and Pleasure

Audiences were not always thought of as critical, active and engaged. An entire body of literature ranging from the Frankfurt School (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1972) to effects researchers such as Bandura *et al.* (1963) and Anderson (2001) have all argued for the passivity of audiences and for the commoditization of the masses who sit zombie-like in front of the big screen, hypodermically receiving whatever media producers give them and helplessly imitating the actions of those on television. The effects school in particular has argued that children and teens exhibit violent behaviour that is directly influenced by violent media, such as video games and television programmes (Anderson, 2001), and has been met with a wide range of biological, methodological and ethical critiques.

The field of audience research has sought to contest this effects-based, mass-manipulating approach, illustrating instead that audiences do in fact engage with programmes in a multi-dimensional way, and that they are critical viewers who challenge and question what they are watching. Furthermore, the relationship between audiences and media texts is far from innocent, whether one is watching a news programme or a so-called 'trashy' soap opera, as Morley argued in his research on *The Nationwide Audience*, where he (albeit contentiously) showed that viewers, based on social class and profession, derive different meanings from the same programme, adopting dominant, negotiated or oppositional positions in response to the text in question (Morley, 1980). While audience studies such as Morley's have been critiqued methodologically and otherwise (organising the study to find the desired results, asking different questions to different groups, etc), they have without question illustrated that the relationship between text and viewer is multifaceted and often unexpected.

Early audience studies have sought not only to disprove notions of audience passivity, but have also investigated how and why viewers derive pleasure from certain texts. As Ang (1996: 17) points out in her study, *Watching Dallas*:

Placing emphasis on the pleasure that people experience from Dallas is not a harmless theoretical (and political) choice. By so doing we are acknowledging that people can have a positive relationship with Dallas – a hedonistic attitude which is at odds with the doctrine that mass culture primarily manipulates the masses.

Ang asked Dutch fans of the soap opera *Dallas* to write in what they enjoyed about the show, and she found that pleasure came from a variety of reasons, and was often a contradictory and unexpected emotion. Some fans experienced an enjoyment that went beyond any feelings of resistance or derision towards the genre. This dual mentality of simultaneously liking something one would be expected to disparage, and of wanting to engage with this 'collusion of dominant representations' is particularly relevant in the context of *GND* and illustrates how a show of this type produces pleasure in teen audiences, confirming Ang's assertion that, 'Pleasure is therefore obviously something uncertain and precarious' (Ang, 1996: 85).

When studying audiences, it is critical to remember that different viewers, based on their own life experiences, social strata and sex, engage with texts in completely dissimilar ways. As Ang notes, 'Experiencing pleasure is not a conscious, directed activity (although one can strive for it), but something that "happens", something which comes over the viewer according to his or her feelings' (Ang, 1996: 83). Ang's work, along with Modleski and Radway's studies (*Loving with a Vengeance*, 1982, and *Reading the Romance*, 1984, respectively) challenges previous notions about women's associations with genres like the soap opera and romance novel, instead arguing that these cultural forms are worth being taken seriously and that women are not passive dupes to them, but rather use these genres in empowering ways. *GND* is a text in the same vein; though it may be derided for its subject matter, it simultaneously allows for positive, pleasurable associations.

Studying Reality TV

Ang argues that realism and authenticity are two key sources of pleasure for audiences: 'The more "genuine" a character appears to be, the more he or she is valued' (Ang, 1996: 33). This is true for reality television and soap operas alike. As reality TV shows have come to dominate airwaves, audience studies have begun to focus on the genre and its various sub-genres (the contest show, the makeover show, the 'real life' of a celebrity show, etc). Murray and Ouellette define reality TV as 'an unabashedly commercial genre united less by aesthetic rules or certainties than by the fusion of popular entertainment with a self-conscious claim to

the discourse of the real' (Murray and Ouellette, 2004: 2). It is designed to sell products, to entertain and also to provide viewers with the feeling that they are seeing what occurs behind closed doors:

What ties together all the various formats of the reality TV genre is their professed abilities to more fully provide viewers an unmediated, voyeuristic, yet often playful look into what may be called the "entertaining real". This fixation with "authentic" personalities, situations, and narratives is considered to be reality TV's primary distinction from fictional television and also its primary selling point. (Murray and Ouellette, 2004: 4)

While reality TV may raise new questions for audience research (the spectator becoming the celebrity, the surveillance/voyeuristic aspect, the implications for self-improvement which are often encouraged during a series, how people of different genders and social classes respond to the genre, etc.), the aspects of authenticity and identifying what is real and what is not play a crucial role in giving pleasure to audiences. The emphasis on the 'authentic' that Murray and Ouellette point out is concurrent with the findings in Jones' study of *Big Brother* fans, which states that, 'It was the job of the audience to spot the fakers. This appeared to be the most important reward associated with the act of viewing' (Jones, 2002: 414). The idea that the home should be 'an uncomplicated site of authenticity' and a place to 'be oneself' (Wood, Skeggs and Thumim, 2009: 138), is discussed by Wood, Skeggs and Thumim and recalls Ang's study, despite the change in genre. Jones also points out the relevance of looking at earlier soap studies in order to understand the reality TV audience: 'there is a strong connection between the way soap operas are consumed by audiences in UK society and the way viewers respond to *Big Brother*' (Jones, 2002: 408). One of the plethora of questions raised by the popularity of reality television has been posed by Janet Jones in her work on *Big Brother* fans: 'One can't help asking whether we can reconcile the shift from living vicariously through fictional characters to living vicariously through real people depicted in an artificial way within a heavily constructed environment' (Jones, 2003: 409). This clash of real with artificial, of living with fictional, is central to the enjoyment of *GND*.

Another important emotion that is connected with experiencing pleasure, particularly from a media text that one may otherwise regard with distaste, is irony:

By ironizing commentary a distance is created from the reality represented in Dallas...Irony then comes to lead its own life and this viewing attitude becomes a necessary condition for experiencing pleasure in the first place...irony enables them to enjoy it without suffering pangs of conscience. (Ang, 1996: 99-101)

While people would perhaps prefer not to like a show of *GND*'s ilk, an ironic viewing position permits viewers to critique the characters' tastes, intellects and pursuits, while simultaneously allowing them to keep on watching the programme.

In the field of reality television, empirical studies conducted thus far have explored issues of class and gender and how they are re-produced on TV, the postfeminist sensibility of many reality television programmes, particularly of the makeover variety, notions of authenticity, the introduction of the domestic private sphere into the public sphere (and its prevalence as a reality TV environment), the role of surveillance in many of these shows (which theoretically links to Foucault's (1979) notions of governmentality and the internalisation of self-policing and self-disciplining tendencies), the emphasis and celebration of the individual and, ultimately, the aspirational undertones many of these programmes carry. All of this has served to unravel yet another layer of information about audiences: how they interpret things, how they derive pleasure from what they see, how they judge characters, and also, in the case of reality television, what motivates them to participate in these programmes. Unfortunately, a detailed investigation into questions of class and cultural capital would go beyond the scope of this project, but it is worth noting that the cultural capital in this show does not go in one direction, as it does in, for example, the British *What Not To Wear*, where Trinny and Susannah impart the wisdom of their moneyed selves to the lower and middle class women who come on the show, desperate for an external transformation (Bourdieu, 1987).

In this case, the girls have upgraded their class status, moving from middle-class upbringings (in Bridget and Holly's case) and lower-middle class (in Kendra's case) to the Playboy Mansion, and Hugh Hefner has imparted his cultural capital (and social capital) onto them, teaching them about life, taking them on trips around the world and generally educating them. Interestingly, they also impart some of their learned knowledge onto us, showing viewers the wildlife in their backyard and teaching the audience about what they've seen and where they've been, so that their cultural and social capital moves in many directions, including reaching towards the viewers.

Representation and Othering

Stuart Hall's work on the politics of representation, where he traces the mimetic and constructivist approaches of how images and characters are depicted, also informs this research, particularly because both the male and females on the show are distinctly characterised by stereotypical gender roles (Hall, 1997). As Hall points out, stereotyping fixes meanings that are given to groups and those images are subsequently reproduced. For example, we mentally link a blonde with pneumatic breasts with the term 'bimbo' and it is difficult for us to shed that image, even when presented with an alternate truth (Hall, 1997). *GND* gives voice to those who were previously silenced, the 2-D Playmate images from the magazine page. However, even though they now have a voice of their own, they are still confined to behaving within traditional gender stereotypes (as a result of their position in the Mansion and reinforced by editing and production techniques of the show) which encourage feminine submission to a man and using sexual wiles to get ahead.

Performing Gender

Edwards, in her essay on MTV's *Real World*, points out that instead of eradicating gender and class-based stereotypes, the reality TV genre serves to reinforce and re-build them through what she terms 'hegemonic masculinity' and 'emphasized femininity', arguing that the show performs the cultural work of reasserting patriarchal gender roles (Moorty and Ross, 2004: 205). This research also closely follows the work of Wood, *et al.* (2009: 147), particularly their emphasis on the labour of femininity in reality TV shows:

What we see on 'reality' television is a visualization of different performatives and demands to 'do' femininity, domesticity and emotional management in particular ways...To become a worthy national citizen one has to labour on and invest in one's self; to not do so is seen as a public failure, a lack of self care and a lack of self-control.

For their study, they also critically analysed the preponderance of the word 'sad' in their interviews with women, and how this adjective straddled the boundary between empathy and judgement, essentially demonstrating how the women vicariously positioned themselves in the programmes and also derisively critiqued those who were on the show. I will adopt a similar technique in thematically analysing my own interviews.

Notions of the 'right' kind of femininity are relevant to *GND* because Kendra, the tomboy, is frequently vilified for failing to act as feminine as the other girls, and Holly in particular complains (with barely-concealed derision) that Kendra is disinterested in 'girly' activities, like

throwing Bridget's dog a party and painting Easter eggs, or dressing up and getting her makeup done. While the other girls are prompt and disciplined, Kendra is more rebellious: she is often late, unkempt and generally unruly. In most episodes (and in every episode that I showed the teenagers), there was a subtle (or sometimes more overt) indication that Holly did not approve of this, a sentiment Angela McRobbie terms 'postfeminist symbolic violence' (McRobbie, 2004). Through performing the 'right' kind of femininity (looking a certain way, acting 'their place' in relation to the powerful man in their lives), these women have improved their lots in life. Butler's theory of gender performativity is relevant in framing not only how people on the show are characterized, but how teens discuss gender roles and construct their sense of when gender is being 'correctly' acted out (Butler, 1999).

The idea of gender as a construction and performing 'feminine' behaviour is a central factor in the programme, which distinguishes the three girls (who are physically virtually indistinguishable) from one another and establishes Holly and Bridget as 'feminine' and Kendra as 'other'.

The Postfeminist Physique

Postfeminism is a contentious term because it is an entanglement of feminist and post-feminist concerns, and many critics are dubious about its validity. It has been used to conceptualise theoretical frameworks in studies of certain reality television programmes (especially the makeover genre and shows like *Wife Swap*) and I am using it in this context because its conflation of subjugation and sexuality, and its emphasis on the domestic and on women's bodies, is relevant both to an analysis of *GND* and to teenagers' responses to the show (Wood and Skeggs, 2004). As Gill explains, it can be understood as an epistemological break within feminism, influenced by poststructuralism, postmodernism and postcolonialism; a historical shift that has moved into a new period of feminism with new issues and concerns; and it is also thought of as a position antithetical to feminism, a reaction against it (Gill, 2007: 249).

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault (1979) argues that certain practices associated with modern institutions are accompanied by a more insidious power focused on the body. Through disciplinary techniques such as constant surveillance modelled in the Panopticon and carried over into other modern institutions (e.g., schools, hospitals, military), 'docile' or subjugated bodies are produced in support of the dominant order (Foucault, 1979). Using Foucaultian notions of disciplinary power and self-governing behaviour, Sandra Lee Bartky

has argued that all women are in fact inmates of the Panopticon (Bartky, 1990), and the prevalence of images of a certain kind of ideal beauty exist in this programme, where everyone is young, blonde and buxom. In the postfeminist reality TV context, the need to remodel oneself both inside and out and to strive to be the best (i.e. thin and attractive) version of oneself is encouraged and forms the basis of many programmes. In some cases, bodies can serve as larger narrative statements about women's roles in our current society. As Negra (2001: 181) writes of pop star and actress Cher:

Her celebrity narrative is consistent with a broader cultural narrativization of plastic surgery as empowerment...Cher's authorship of her own body clearly works to disturb mainstream cultural forums, to threaten cherished patterns of patriarchal ownership, and to de-stabilize some of the more conservative meanings of glamour and stardom.

Now that surgery is so ubiquitous in celebrity and mainstream culture, the way media programmes represent bodies is becoming more problematic. The stars of *GND* are all surgical, but their bodies reflect a submission to patriarchy rather than a rebellion against it. Even several of the reality TV stars who appear on programmes ranging from *The Hills* to *Big Brother* are surgically enhanced, super toned and/or super slim. These on-screen images project a certain ideal for viewers off-screen, which ultimately ties in with Gill's notion of the 'self-policing narcissistic gaze', a result of the shift of women from sexual objects to desiring sexual subjects (Gill, 2007: 258). While women were once critiqued on their appearance by others, they are now trained to take the disciplining of their looks into their own hands, to perform the 'labour of femininity', and to blame themselves for any appearance-related failures.

Porn Goes Mainstream

Finally, it is useful to contextualise this research within a framework of 'porno chic', as identified by McNair (2002), to contextualise the preponderance of this type of show and the nonchalance of opinions regarding mainstream sex:

Porno chic: involving depictions of pornography in non-pornographic contexts in art and culture; pastiche or parody of porn; homage to porn or explorations into it and the incorporation of porn in mainstream cultural products (Paasonen, et al., 2007: 8).

This relates to the idea of pornification, which implies that sex is commodified:

...used in selling a variety of products both material and immaterial; the markets of pornography seem to be in continuous increase while porno chic has become part and parcel of youth cultures and the stylization of the self (Paasonen, et al., 2007: 12).

As Levy argues, commercial sex has gained such a normative status that women no longer distance themselves from it but rather apply its aesthetics to their everyday lives in order to present themselves as strong, sexual and independent (Levy, 2006). There is certainly a discourse in present-day media, encouraged by shows like *GND*, which intimates that 'acting sexy' can help put you on the path to self-empowerment and that stripper poles and fake breasts are just casual accessories in the quest for sexual liberation.

Statement of Conceptual Framework

As mentioned above, the main theoretical approach relevant in framing this research is an audience studies position which employs early audience research studies as well as more recent studies on reality television shows and rejects the alternative, effects-based viewpoint. Using theorists like Ang, Radway and Modleski, I plan to explore how pleasure is obtained from this programme and how potentially contentious subject matter can be reconciled within an academic framework and can have positive, pleasurable associations. I am interested in how gender roles are constructed on the programme and how they are portrayed and discussed by teenagers, particularly in reference to their thoughts on stereotypical (and sometimes negative) depictions of men and women that feature prominently in the programme. I will use Hall to refer to the politics of representation and stereotyping (in reference to the gendered other).

In addition to exploring the contradictory nature of pleasure and the diverse ways in which it is obtained by audiences, I feel that looking at this text through a postfeminist framework is

also beneficial. I understand the contentious character of the term postfeminism, but it is precisely the all-encompassing nature of this theory, managing at once to deny and embrace feminism, which is at work in *GND*, where freedom and fun are equated with liberal attitudes towards sex. Using theorists such as Gill and Bartky, I will explore how (female) teenagers are internalising pressures regarding bodies and appearance in their discussions about this media text and others, while Butler and McRobbie will help to contextualise the importance of the "right" kind of femininity.

Objectives of Research

The theoretical approaches discussed above have been selected to explore the following questions: What are the pleasures associated with watching *GND*? How do teenagers talk about gendered representations in reality TV? How does the programme *GND* construct gender roles through representations of hegemonic masculinity and femininity? As far as I am aware, there has not been any academic research relating to audience studies done using *GND*, and I am confident that this is the first project in which the programme is discussed with teenagers. This research can contribute to both gender and media disciplines: it explores the construction of gender and an analysis of gender roles using a postfeminist framework and it also adds a new dimension to audience studies, exploring how audiences interact with a text and derive pleasure from it. In addition, it sheds light on how teens react to programmes that broadcast adult material in a PG format and that approach them as consumers of the Playboy brand.

4. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

In terms of research strategy, I initially watched all of the episodes of the series *GND*, and found that many themes recurred throughout: stereotypical gender roles, performing a certain kind of femininity, discussions of motherhood and the domestic, beautifying treatments, talk of exercise and dieting and playing dress up, among others. I selected three episodes that I found to be particularly relevant to my questions of interest: What are the pleasures associated with watching *GND*? How do teenagers talk about gendered representations in reality TV? How does the programme *GND* construct gender roles through representations of hegemonic masculinity and femininity? The episodes I selected were the first episode of the show, introducing Hef's girlfriends and the Playboy Mansion, an episode entitled 'Midsummer Night's Dream' in which the girls prepared for the biggest party of the

year at the Mansion and gave Bridget's younger sister, Anastasia, a makeover; and an episode entitled 'Heavy Petting', which shows the girls hosting a dog birthday party and the Playboy Mansion's annual, child-friendly Easter party.

These episodes are fairly representative of the usual subject matter on the show: grooming, discussing their relationship with Hef, discussing their own future plans, dressing up and attending parties. I did not choose episodes that focused on the cast travelling (which they occasionally do, to visit Las Vegas, foreign countries and their families), or anything too closely related to *Playboy* magazine (their photo shoots, Holly working as a picture editor and their search for new Playmates). The reason for this is that firstly, these episodes occur about once every five episodes so are not as representative as what I selected; secondly, I thought it was crucial for the episodes to be based in the Mansion, since that is the whole premise of the show; and thirdly, given the nature of my audience I did not feel it was appropriate to show teenagers an episode that focused exclusively on the girls in various states of undress, as the photo shoot episodes tend to.

I then conducted a brief visual/moving image analysis, the aim of which was to discover 'the overall interaction of meanings and the logic of how they are structured' on these three episodes and their key components, making note of recurring themes, phrases and editing techniques (White, 1992: 177). This was to understand how editing techniques were employed to construct certain gendered images and personalities for each character, implying that meaning is constructed through tools like colour, music, camera angles, location and wardrobe (Hansen et al, 1998). If there had been no time constraints, I would have conducted a more in-depth visual analysis and several more interviews, focusing on specific age groups of males and females, because 13-19 is a broad range, encompassing children who have barely heard of Playboy to those whose opinions on the brand were fully formed before the advent of the programme. In fact, I would ideally conduct focus groups and individual interviews with 16-17-year-old girls (perhaps comparing groups from different socio-economic backgrounds) because I found that they were the most enthusiastic about the programme and also very aware of the brand and other pop-cultural references surrounding it. If there had been more time, I also would have been interested in speaking with American teenagers about the programme and seeing how their opinions differed from those of teenagers in the UK.

After this initial visual analysis of the programme, I focused on finding my interview group. My initial impetus in interviewing teenagers came when I casually remarked that I'd watched the *GND* to my fiancé's 16-year-old cousin and she shrieked, 'Oh my god, I love that show!' and then started discussing her favourite characters and episodes. This had happened with my friend's sister previously, and I became intrigued: what did they enjoy about it, were other kids their age enjoying it too, were their reasons for liking it similar to mine? This is a programme that markets adult content in a PG manner, which is another motive that I had in discussing the show with teenagers.

In choosing my interviewees, I wanted them to all be from the UK, because I was interested in what their reactions were towards this archetypal American programme, especially because I know that other US-based reality shows (*The Hills*, *Laguna Beach*, *My Super Sweet 16*) are popular with this demographic. I was fortunate in that my base of interviewees included teenagers whom I mostly knew prior to the interviews, because they were siblings or relatives of friends of mine. I think this was advantageous in that the kids (aged from 13-19) were comfortable with me and felt at ease expressing their opinions regarding television in general and this show in particular. I am aware that knowing these children could also have had a negative impact on the interviews in terms of my own bias and their own desires to either impress me (potentially) or simply act in a slightly performative manner. However I do think that I structured my interview guide in an innocuous yet thorough manner, so that our interviews were more like a casual conversation which encouraged the teenagers to open up about their preferences and dislikes. I asked them general questions about reality television and which programmes they liked or did not and why. Then I showed them an episode of the *GND* (they chose between the three mentioned above). In some instances, I was able to watch the show with them and make notes on their interactions and remarks. Immediately after the episode, I asked them about the show: what they liked and disliked, what they thought of the characters, what was happening in the episode, how they felt about the girls and Hef. For the most part, the questions were general and the teenagers elaborated on them based on what they felt most passionately about, but occasionally I asked more probing questions, about midway through the interview.

In terms of the demographic I interviewed, they are all UK-born, from middle to upper class families, and attend (or had attended) public school in one of the top 100 schools in the country, according to the *Sunday Times* Top Preparatory Schools League table (*Times Online*, 2008). I also felt it was important to speak with both males and females to diversify

my data, so I spoke with four boys and seven girls (I included more females because I knew they tended to be fans of the show). I wanted to see whether boys and girls would have similar responses when discussing gender roles on the show, and whether they'd find the same aspects of the programme pleasurable. Most of my interviewees watched reality TV regularly, and about half were avid fans of this show in particular.

I chose to use individual semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 1996) over focus groups because I felt these were the most relevant in determining personal reasons for enjoyment and for gauging reactions to the show and its characters. Also, with teens especially, focus groups can be rather elusive territory (see Buckingham and Bragg's *Young People, Sex and the Media*, 2006) because there tends to be a performative element where one or more participants is interested in showing off, while a shyer member may not feel confident enough to assert his or her own opinion. As Berger (1998: 55) explains regarding the goals of the interview:

The depth interview...is highly focused. It is conducted to get at particular issues, such as hidden feelings or attitudes and beliefs of which a respondent may not be aware or that are only dimly in his or her consciousness.

Moreover, with teenagers, individual interviews are especially important, as they often have a tendency to just agree with their friends or peers in a group setting, while in individual interviews they may feel more comfortable speaking freely. For these reasons I chose the interview technique instead of other methods like the survey, which is occasionally used in audience research studies.

Finally, I was fortunate enough to be able to employ Wood's text-in-action method, which directly captures the text-audience dynamic (Wood, 2005). From the *Nationwide* studies, Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding paradigm has provided a theoretical base for explaining differing opinions from audiences on the same programme (Morley, 1980). Wood (2005: 122) argues for a 'text in action' approach, which strives to:

...capture moments of television in order to envisage the life of texts in the life of the home and to dissolve the text/subject boundary altogether...one must recognize that neither the text nor the audience are unified or bounded, but that the experience of viewing exists within their relationship with each other...

This was a particularly relevant and useful method for my research, because in watching teenagers interact with the text, I saw how involved they became and which characters and scenes animated them. Like Wood, whose study focused on the talk show audience, I made

note of primary responses (second-person pronouns, response tokens such as 'yeah', completion of a turn taken by a speaker in the studio), formulations, argumentative interrogations and responses evoking personal experiences and stories (Wood, 2005). Thus, with 'text-in-action', the interviewer can see for themselves how the audience constructs and establishes their role in relation to the programme, a process I found especially interesting within the teenage demographic.

In constructing my interview guide, I looked to Kvale (1996: 133-34) and used a combination of introducing, follow-up, direct, indirect structuring and probing questions. I felt it was important to ask a series of general questions ranging from: Do you like reality TV? Which shows? Why?, to asking teens to sum up what happened in the episode, just to see the range of interpretations and the characters they most engaged with. I also asked probing questions when I felt they were relevant. I recorded some interviews and took notes with others, and I transcribed the interviews (and text-in-action where relevant) immediately after the interview took place. Once I had completed all of the interviews, I manually went through them in a thematic manner, searching for common motifs, repeated phrases or words and derogatory and positive remarks. I then grouped the answers by sex and went through them again, to see if any obvious differences or similarities would emerge. It should be noted that interviews either took place in my home or in the LSE library. Due to the nature of interviewing some under-18-year-olds, I prepared parental consent forms as well as individual consent forms for the participants and emailed them to parents prior to the interview for them to sign or ask me any relevant questions. I gave participants over the age of 18 consent forms upon their arrival. In addition, all of the names of my interviewees have been changed for them to remain anonymous.

5. RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

While teenagers are critical and engaged viewers, a first important point that my research showed is that they are not always entirely sure what it is they are watching, at least in the context of this programme. Lisa, a 13-year-old girl from London, used adjectives like 'funny' and 'sad' to describe the episode, which she enjoyed, but she did not understand the relationship between Hefner and the three girlfriends until I explained it to her after the show (Lisa, 13, London). She exclaimed, 'That's really wrong!' (Lisa, 13, London) but was still very enthusiastic about the non-sexualised pleasures the show offered (the Easter egg party for kids, for example), which she kept referring to as 'very cool'. The pleasures proposed on the show were of far more interest to her than a sexual relationship which she found to be hardly plausible.

Meanwhile, even older children did not have all of the background knowledge of Playboy and its founder. Craig was unsure 'Who exactly is Hef?' while Will asked what Hef did, if the show was set in Vegas (it's set in LA) and what a Playmate was (Craig, 19 and Will, 14, both London). With a show that is partly sexualised in nature, it is worth noting that the history of the Playboy brand is not connected with its present-day incarnation as a merchandiser for teens and primetime programme. These gaps in knowledge did not lessen the teenagers' pleasure in the programme but are worth making note of considering that some watching the show may not even realise where its roots lie. It should also be taken into account that among the interviewees, some were extremely well-informed because they were fans and also had a penchant for reading about pop culture gossip surrounding the characters; for example, Julia, 17, informed me that Hefner is still married to the mother of his two sons, who live nearby (Julia, 17, London).

On a related note, some of the teenagers felt this programme was largely distanced from the typical image of Playboy, and was geared to those even younger than themselves. Sophie (17, London), when discussing Playboy merchandise, said she felt 'it has chav connotations, but it's also more for younger people', while Ellie (17, London) remarked that she remembered liking it when she was younger, 'Because it would make me look older'. The reference to 'chav culture' equates the Playboy bunny with a trashy, lower-class demographic, which these girls did not want to be associated with sartorially, although they did when they were younger to convey a more sexualised, older-girl image. As Levy (2006) has pointed out, the Bunny symbol is circulating in our postfeminist society independently of

the messages attached to it; in fact, it now stands as a symbol of liberated sexuality. Julia (17, London) was perturbed by the idea that '12-year-old girls are wearing it' but concluded, 'the Bunny symbol is very detached from the brand'. If there had been the opportunity for further research, it would have been interesting to look into other aspects of the brand and how teenagers relate to it.

Aside from the three London university students, who expressed their dislike of reality TV programmes (although they admitted to watching them nonetheless), all of my interviewees were fans of reality TV. For Jim (18, Essex), reality TV is enjoyable because of 'the more intense and unpredictable drama' and the fact that 'you can relate to it slightly more than you can TV dramas' because it's more 'believable', despite the often concocted scenarios. Thus, authenticity is still a key source of pleasure, as Ang and Jones argued. The interest in realism was alluded to by several of the teenagers, despite their claims that the show was 'heavily edited' and the relationship 'a sham', which suggests that they enjoy finding what is real within the programme. These findings are consistent with those of Jones' *Big Brother* study and demonstrate that catching people 'faking it' and being inauthentic is still a major source of pleasure for viewers of reality television (even when the show does not involve voting cast members off).

Lucy (16, Wiltshire) watches shows 'tailored towards a younger audience, making it easy for them to relate to and potentially easier to aspire to' because the characters are 'often of a similar age group and probably experiencing similar things'. Feeling similarities with a character in the programme, like authenticity, is another key reason for enjoyment. Ellie, a huge fan of the show, said she preferred it to programmes like *Skins*, where 'something massive happens every episode...someone dies or someone cheats... [With *GND*] I like how it's more their everyday life' (Ellie, 17, London). She also put herself in the shoes of Bridget's sister, Anastasia, when Holly gifted her with a pair of fake breasts, stating, 'My mum did that one Christmas. It was horrifying' (Ellie, 17, London). Thus, watching the quotidian lives of others, no matter how removed they actually are from a viewer's own life, provides another source of pleasure, and a sense of knowing the character intimately and being able to relate to them. Establishing an emotional connection with the characters (one interviewee mentioned a common love of horror films which Bridget shares which led her to identify with her) allows for living vicariously through the people on-screen, which is related to escapist fantasies, and ultimately, is another way of gleaning pleasure from the show.

The escapist element is connected with aspirational feelings that shows like *GND* inspire:

I think the attachment to them is because the women in these shows are presented as images of perfection, being extremely beautiful and wealthy...I think that reality TV is such a success because it is like an elevated, extreme and embellished version of reality...and encourages people to witness a small glimpse of a supposedly glamorous world. (Lucy, 16, Wiltshire)

She touches on an important reason for the pleasure in *GND*: the fantasy element of the programme, which allows viewers entrée to a sparkling Hollywood world and also demonstrates that while these girls are living out a fantasy, they were once just like you and me. The potential to become them (even if viewers are not consciously interested in that) is palpable, and a source of excitement. Hannah (18, Cambridge) concurred, stating she enjoys that it's 'a glimpse into another world...It's slightly more acceptable than other reality TV because it's not a set-up scenario, it is a real house, it does exist on a daily basis'. It is therefore interesting that two of the primary sources of pleasure in the show result from two opposites: an interest in the real and an escape into fantasy. The fantasy element also entranced Ellie, Sophie and Julia, who were shown the 'Midsummer Night's Dream' episode and were very interested in the 'painted women' (who wear nothing but body paint), remarking, 'It would be so cool to be painted like that' (all 17, London). The show is selling its postfeminist message of carefree fun, wrapped in a layer of sex appeal, and teenage viewers are buying it. Craig described it thusly: 'It kind of feels like a version of the American dream, but for airhead girls' (Craig, 17, London). Yet educated teenagers are also susceptible to this postfeminist fantasy.

As Ang, Modleski and Radway noted, there was often a conflicted feeling among their interviewees, who felt they should not be enjoying programmes that were distinctly non-feminist or 'trashy'. Lucy (16, Wiltshire) expressed the same opinion, stating that she 'loves to hate this' and 'does enjoy it, yet I really don't want to simultaneously'. Her opinion captures the conflicted feelings that viewers have towards 'guilty pleasure' programmes such as this one and interestingly enough, she was the only interviewee who seemed genuinely ill at ease with her enjoyment of a programme that she felt sent a bad 'moral' message.

While girls tended to be more open about their enjoyment of the episode of *GND*, the boys were less impressed, saying it was 'a bit dull', 'what you'd expect' and 'so boring'. Some were very critical of it; Barry (18, London), stated that it was 'some weird cash-in on some

sexualised culture', that the girls were 'basically an upper class form of escort' and 'getting ahead on sex'. This fits within the postfeminist and porno chic framework where sex is ubiquitous, so mainstream that it does not even shock any more. Interestingly, Craig, despite being critical of the reality TV genre in general, was pleasantly surprised at what he saw: 'I'm impressed by how some of them were educated and had aspirations beyond just looking pretty' (Craig, 19, London). While they fit the stereotypical image of the Playboy bunny in terms of appearance, their personalities revealed them to be ambitious as well as 'caring', 'sweet' and 'nice', which caused many to sympathise with them. The emotional connection once again ties in with the pleasurable emotions the show inspires in viewers. I suspect the boys were more critical of the show because its subject matter was distinctly girlish and did not involve any of Playboy's raunchier associations.

The boys did enjoy aspects of the show, and their main source of pleasure seemed to derive from the derision that they expressed towards the characters. Jim (18, Essex) had quite a violent reaction to Kendra, repeatedly calling her 'a f***ing little hoodrat' (which I suspect is a reference to her more low-brow tastes and origins and also her constant refusal to take part in what the others enjoy) and vehemently saying, 'You couldn't make her feminine', an interesting comment in light of performative femininity and the symbolic violence directed at her from the other two girls for failing to be appropriately girly. Will agreed that the girls were 'attractive' but:

...the tomboy one (Kendra) maybe less so because she tries less hard, wears less makeup. A lot of the time women look better if they try...Because she sleeps all day and throws clothes on, it doesn't help her appearance much. (Will, 14, London)

As Hall (1997) argues with reference to representations, gender is marked by difference. The teenagers identify femininity with being put together and looking a certain way. Thus, one of the ways gender roles are constructed on the show is with repeated references to how the 'feminine' girls act feminine (dog parties, dressing up, discussing motherhood) and how Kendra is marked as different. She is the tomboy, an 'other' who is not quite right in the eyes of Holly and Bridget and also in the eyes of the teenage boys, who have firm notions of what appropriately feminine behaviour should be. The teenage boys are also adept at picking up on the hostility between the girls; in a scene where Kendra isn't quite as skilled as the other two at painting eggs, Barry remarked, 'There is such girl bitchiness' (Barry, 18, London). There is also the sense from the teenage boys that they expect the girls to be

badmouthing each other because they view cattiness as another characteristic of typical female behaviour (several made reference to this during the interviews).

Pleasure deriving from derision, from feeling superior to the on-screen characters and from ironic distancing was a key finding. Will took great pleasure in the 'stupidity' of the characters and relished insulting them: 'The dog one (Bridget) is an idiot. The other one is naggy and clingy (Holly). And the third one (Kendra) is boring'; it's 'guaranteed they don't know what happened on Easter'; and in reference to Hef's former girlfriend Crystal, 'What, did she turn 30 so they had to boot her?' (Will, 14, London). He admitted to enjoying the show (which I suspect in part relates to his age and how he expects a 14-year-old boy should feel in reference to Playboy) but also made some very astute comments suggesting a psychological understanding of these women, remarking that the dogs played such an important role to them 'because they're in polygamous relationships, they can't have proper kids so they use their animals' (Will, 14, London). Barry was also emotionally charged when watching the programme and at one point started yelling at the TV:

What are you doing living in this house? All these girls are fundamentally immature, that's why they live with this old guy and let him buy them stuff – they haven't realised they're adults. (Barry, 18, London)

In reference to Holly's desire to have a child to host the Easter party next year, Barry muttered, 'Kids take time to grow, you moron' (Barry, 18, London). These teenagers became most engaged with the programme when they were critical of it and I would argue that at these moments of ironic commentary or aggressive derision, they were enjoying it the most because they were identifying strongly with the characters and ultimately feeling superior to these women whom they view as stupid and immature. There is also an element of empathising with them (especially with Barry) and wanting them to take charge of their lives.

The importance of youth for women in a postfeminist society (as Wolf, Gill, etc. have all pointed out) cannot be understated and acting 'girlish' (by dressing up pets and painting Easter eggs) is a crucial determinant of attractiveness. Once again gender roles are reified by the construction of these women as young, 'innocent' girls paired with the old rakish character, and the girlfriends – by wearing their hair in pigtails and having pink rooms lined with Hello Kitty stuffed animals – cement themselves as virtual teens. The teenagers I spoke with noticed this tendency, referring to them as 'typical 90210 dumb girls' (Will, 14, London),

'Bridget's like a baby' (Julia, 17, London) and to their lives as 'Barbie worlds', 'like a sorority but with sex' (Ellie, 17, London) and like a 'Disney movie' (Lisa, 13, London). This identification with younger women by the characters coincides with their appeal to a teenage demographic because they are instantly relatable.

In terms of characters, the teenagers were drawn to some more than others. Bridget was frequently dismissed as an 'idiot' but as 'sweet', while Holly was called 'nice' and 'pathetic' several times (because of her attachment to Hef). Many of the girls thought Kendra was the most 'natural' (despite her obvious breast implants, platinum hair and tan skin) and relaxed and deemed her their 'favourite'. In contrast to the 'unrealistic stereotype' of the other girls because they're 'obsessed' with little things and look like 'dolls', Lucy liked Kendra the best because she's the most 'relatable, you can look at her and think she's the most like me', she's 'the most real thing in it' and she 'wasn't wearing makeup and wasn't abiding by their rules' (Lucy, 16, Wiltshire). Not only does Lucy bring up the issue of symbolic violence inherent in the relationships on the show, but she also interestingly relates more to one girl than the others, even though, in terms of physicality, they are close to carbon copies of one another (although Kendra is generally more unkempt and unruly). In opposition to what teenage boys showed a preference for, teenage girls like to see women without makeup and looking more 'real' (13-year-old Lisa preferred Kendra because she wore no makeup and 17-year-old Ellie likes her best because 'She can laugh at herself and she has fun'). For me, this was particularly fascinating because in terms of how Kendra is constructed on the show, she is 'othered' – she is the late, untidy, non-feminine girlfriend who does not enjoy participating in their activities and does not act as devoted to Hef as the others do. Yet, she is the most self-aware and un-self-conscious of the trio, which is what triggers female audiences to emotionally connect with her at the expense of the others, who seem to be trying to control her and make her lose her individual spark. The girls viewed her as the rebel who was least susceptible to hegemonic female stereotypes, which is why they particularly identified with her.

Body image and appearance came up frequently in the interviews, even before I asked a question about those topics. It was clear that all of the teenagers were preoccupied with the appearance of these women, and most considered them to look like a stereotypical ideal that was unrealistic. As far as looks were concerned, the teenagers felt the girls were 'pretty' but also 'fake'. Several remarked they felt social circumstances would play a role in whether girls would feel pressured to look like Hefner's girlfriends, that their friends would not want to but

'girls who go into glamour modelling would' (Sophie, 17, London). Ellie (17, London) felt that 'now because it's on TV it seems much more popular and you'd think ok, I want to be in *Playboy*, I want to try this' while Lucy stated that:

They'll see how skinny they are and how blonde their hair is; half the girls in my school are blonde. I'm blonde now! You're not even looking any different; you think it's the only look that's acceptable. (Lucy, 16, Wiltshire)

The remarks of these girls suggest that the internalising, self-critiquing mechanism is already fully established (even if some consider themselves to be personally unaffected, they imagine that others will be) and that teenage girls are distinctly aware of an existing pressure for their bodies and faces to look a certain way. As Bartky, Gill and Wolf all point out, this image is firmly reiterated by the media and celebrities. Craig agreed with this idea, stating that it was more acceptable to look like a 'normal' person in the UK (as opposed to the US): 'The media at least tries to reflect what society looks like rather than what people want it to look like' (Craig, 19, London). Barry felt that this type of programme did send a message about how one *should* look.

I do think there's a lot of indirect influence on how girls should look because of this. The programme demeans girls, saying the only way they can get ahead is by getting a guy to provide for them. (Barry, 18, London)

While the teenagers did not seem to want to emulate the characters on-screen, the general consensus was that they would like to spend a day or two in their shoes. For the teenage girls, it was primarily the non-sexualised normal activities and the beautifying and shopping rituals which appealed to them, if only for an afternoon. There seemed to be an understanding that to be in the Mansion, you had to first engender a Barbie-like appearance.

Reactions to Hefner ran the gamut, with some teenagers finding him lovely ('He's not a creepy old perv, he's so sweet', Ellie, 17, London) while others described him as 'seriously wrong in the head' (Lisa, 13, London). Will (14, London), thought 'Hef was funny as a sleazy old man', suggesting that Hef was playing the role of the elderly rake, which links into Butler's performative gender theories and Hall's stereotyping. There was a sense of male pride at Hef's success with the ladies despite his age, and while Ellie, Julia and Sophie (all 17, London) were all convinced that boys their age would dream of being like Hef, Barry

remarked that 'he'd rather just retire and read a book' (Barry, 18, London). Chloe was surprised by what she saw on the show, stating:

He seems to care for all of them, and they genuinely believe that he does. These girls are all very genuine; they genuinely think it will last forever. The sad thing is in five years he'll have different girls. (Chloe, 17, Midlands)

Once again, issues of authenticity are raised, and Chloe found that she sympathised with these girls, repeatedly saying that they were not 'skanks' and have more to offer. Her repeated emphasis on the word 'genuine' demonstrates how crucial it is to enjoyment for these characters to be believable. Little did she know about how prescient her comment would be regarding the girls' replacements; Hef has three new 'girlfriends' who will be participating in the next season of *GND*.

Hef, despite being aged, also fit in with stereotypical gendered expectations, which the teenagers pointed out, remarking on how he would kiss the girls in turn and how they would all crowd around him and listen astutely. Again, while a woman is often vilified for displays of sexual bravado, this lifestyle is celebrated, which Julia pointed out:

If you think about it, if we heard someone in a Muslim country was living in a house with three women, we'd think that's really bad. But then we see this and there's even a TV show about it. (Julia, 17, London)

6. CONCLUSION

The attitudes of teenagers towards the reality TV programme *GND* provided the basis for this research study which sought to explore how teenagers derived pleasure from the programme, how they discussed gender roles and how gender roles were constructed within the programme. While femininity and masculinity may be fluid, the roles played by Holly, Bridget, Kendra and Hef are most definitely not: the women fall into a stereotypical vision of homogenized beauty, where age, diet, exercise, surgery, makeup and peroxide all play a role, while Hef asserts his masculinity (despite his 80+ years) through these ultra-feminine specimens. When femininity was questioned on the programme, it was queried by the teenagers as well, who already have distinct opinions on what being 'masculine' and 'feminine' should entail. In addition, this research revealed that while teenagers are very competent in discussing the programmes they enjoy, there are gaps in knowledge; in this

case, resulting in large part from the marked dissociation between what Playboy means for their generation, where they associate the brand with pink bedding and rhinestone bunnies.

This research also elaborated on the multitude of pleasures that exist in the relationship between viewer and programme: the search for the authentic, the glimpse of fantasy, the ironic detachment, the derisory critiques and the feelings of superiority to the characters which the show inspired and which contribute to a sensory experience that the teenagers were actively, critically and emotionally involved with. Instead of being a text to dismiss as trash, like the soaps and reality TV programmes before it, *GND* offers up emancipatory potential in its enjoyable aspects. There are numerous opportunities for future research for this programme, not only from an audience perspective: as a postfeminist text of adult content re-branded for teenagers, it deserves in-depth analysis. In addition, this research does provide a solid base for further audience studies that focus on emerging and new television genres which do interest a younger market, so further studies with teenagers and their relationships to these texts would be beneficial to both gender studies and media and communications research.

REFERENCES

- Acocella, J. (2006) "The Girls Next Door", *The New Yorker*, 20 March.
- Adorno, T. and Horkheimer, M. (1972) 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception', *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. New York: Seabury Press, pp. 120-67.
- Anderson, C. A.; Busham, B. J. (2001) Effects of violent video games on aggressive behavior, aggressive cognition, aggressive affect, physiological arousal, and prosocial behavior: a meta-analytic review of the scientific literature. *Psychological Science* 12(5): 353-59.
- Ang, I. (1996) *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Bandura, A., Ross, D., and Ross, S. A. (1963) Vicarious reinforcement and imitative learning. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 67(6): 601-7.
- Bartky, S. L., (1990) *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*. New York: Routledge.
- Berger, A. (1998) *Media Research Techniques, 2nd edition*. CA: Sage.
- Bourdieu, P. (1987) 'What Makes a Social Class? On the Theoretical and Practical Existence of Groups', *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 32: 1-17.
- Buckingham, D. and Bragg, S. (2004) *Young People, Sex and the Media: the facts of life?*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Butler, J. (1999) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* - 2nd edition. London: Routledge.
- E! The Entertainment Channel, 2009, July. The Girls of the Playboy Mansion: uk.eonline.com (accessed August 8, 2009)
- Edwards, L. (2004) "What a Girl Wants": Gender norming on reality game shows, *Feminist Media Studies* 4(2): 203-31.
- Foucault, M. (1979) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. A. Sheridan. New York, NY: Vintage.
- Gill, R. (2007) *Gender and the media*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Hall, Stuart (1980) Encoding/Decoding. in D. Hobson, A. Lowe and P. Willis (eds) *Culture, Media, Language*. London: Hutchinson.
- Hall, S. (1997) The spectacle of the "other". In S. Hall (ed) *Representation: cultural representations and signifying practices*. London: Sage Publications, pp. 223-290.
- Hansen, A., Cottle, S., Negrine, R., and Newbold, C. (1998) *Mass Communication Research Methods*. London: Macmillan.
- Jones, J.-M. (2003) 'Show your Real Face: A Fan Study of the UK BB transmissions. Investigating the boundaries between notions of consumers and producers of factual television'. *New Media and Society* 5(3): 400-21.
- Kvale, S. (1996) Chapter 7: The interview situation. In S. Kvale, *Interviews: an introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. London: Sage Publications, pp. 124-43.
- Levy, A. (2005) *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*. London: Pocket Books.
- McRobbie, A. (2004) 'Notes on 'What Not To Wear' and post-feminist symbolic violence. In L. Adkins (ed) *Feminism After Bourdieu*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, pp 99-109.
- Modleski, T. (1982) *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women*. CT: Archon Books.

- Morley, D. (1980) *The Nationwide Audience: Structure and Decoding*. London: BFI.
- MSNBC, 2009, March 8. Mattel opens flagship Barbie store in Shanghai: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/29557302/> (accessed 19 August 2009)
- MTV, 2009, August 13. Heidi Montag Talks Playboy: <http://www.mtv.co.uk/shows/the-hills/news/141477-heidi-montag-talks-playboy> (accessed 18 August 2009)
- Murray, S. and Ouellette, L. (eds) (2008) *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Negra, D. (2001) Stardom, corporeality and ethnic indeterminacy: Cher's disrupted/disruptive body. In D. Negra, *Off White Hollywood: American culture and ethnic female stardom*. London: Routledge, pp 164-82.
- Paasonen, S., Nikunen, K. and Saarenmaa, L. (eds) (2007) *Pornification, Sex and Sexuality in Media Culture*. New York: Berg.
- Radway, J. (1987) *Reading the romance: Women, patriarchy and popular literature*. London: Verso.
- Sky News, 2009, February 11. Playboy Stationery Written Off: <http://news.sky.com/skynews/Home/UK-News/WH-Smith-Playboy-Stationery-Gets-Pulled/Article/200902215220212> (accessed August 9 2009)
- The Sunday Times Parent Power, The Top Preparatory Schools (2008 edition): http://www.timesonline.co.uk/parentpower/league_tables.php?t=preparatory_schools (accessed August 9, 2009)
- White, M. (1992) Ideological Analysis and Television. In R. Allen (ed.) *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled*. London: Routledge, pp 161-202.
- Wolf, N. (1991) *The Beauty Myth*. New York, NY: Anchor Books.
- Wood, H. (2005) Texting the Subject: Women, Television, and Modern Self-Reflexivity, *The Communication Review* 8(2): 115-35.
- Wood, H. & Skeggs, B. (2004). Notes on Ethical Scenarios of Self on British Reality TV, *Feminist Media Studies* 4(2): 205-8.
- Wood, H., Skeggs, B., and Thumim, N. (2009) 'It's Just Sad': Affect, Judgement and Emotional Labour in 'Reality' Television Viewing In Gillis, S., and Hollows, J. (eds) *Feminism, Domesticity and Popular Culture*. London: Routledge, pp 135-51.

Electronic MSc Dissertation Series

Media@lse Electronic MSc Dissertations will:

Present high quality MSc Dissertations which received a mark of Distinction (72% and above).
Selected dissertations will be published electronically as pdf files, subject to review and approval by the Editors.

Authors retain copyright, and publication here does not preclude the subsequent development of the paper for publication elsewhere.
