

Appropriate Articulations of Taste:
The (re)production of gender in contemporary youth
taste cultures

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Abstract

This thesis explores gender in contemporary youth taste cultures, contributing to the academic field through its illumination of taste's role in the (re)production of gender. We continue to see inequality on the basis of gender in contemporary society and thus this thesis provides a much needed understanding of the (re)production of gender during youth. Much of the academic field has interrogated gender and youth, albeit with the majority looking at the experiences of boys and girls separately. However, little work has considered *taste* as being a potentially regulatory space in terms of gender during youth. Meanwhile, save some important interjections by Skeggs (1997), gender has largely been overlooked in the taste culture literature. This thesis shows that there is great potential in bringing together taste and youth, allowing us to better understand the complexities of gender (re)production. To explore these issues this thesis takes an empirical approach.

In total, 112 people aged 13-16 from the Norfolk region took part in this study. Both traditional and innovative qualitative methods were used, and they were designed to develop a rich understanding of contemporary youth taste cultures. A bespoke identity page was created as a means of capturing the cultural texts young people like and dislike, and a series of focus groups were also undertaken where collective meanings were foregrounded. The richness of empirical evidence and its careful analysis has revealed the significant role that taste plays in young people's discursive (re)production of gender. It finds that young people inscribe a range of cultural texts with gendered value, and that they use these understandings to regulate the parameters of gender 'appropriate' taste. This thesis therefore contributes to the academic field not only through its development of academic theory, but also in the wealth and originality of data that it provides.

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Introduction

2013 saw MP Diane Abbott lament the crisis of masculinity facing boys in Britain, it saw Lego go pink, and it saw segregation on the basis of gender approved by Universities UK. It seems to me that for young people in contemporary Britain gender politics are far from fine. Questions about how gender is (re)produced are therefore pertinent; they are pertinent because gender continues to act as a point where inequality is experienced, and where tensions and crises occur. This thesis explores some of these issues empirically, asking questions about how gender is (re)produced and how differences between boys and girls are maintained.

Taking a poststructuralist account of identity, I argue that gender exists only through discourse, and so to explore issues of gender we need to interrogate discursive (re)production. I believe that one of the ways we can undertake this interrogation is through the exploration of taste cultures. I find taste to be utterly fascinating, especially when we think about it in relation to gender. Why do we like some things and not others? Why might some people think that what we like is odd? As a woman, would it be fair to say that my experience of articulating taste is different to that of a male or queer friend? I therefore believe that an exploration of taste cultures can tell us much about gender. This is precisely because I think that taste is experienced differently by people of different genders. Masculinity and femininity *mean* different things, and so what is *appropriate* for men or women, or boys or girls will be understood differently. It is my belief that we can learn much about gender by focusing on taste, and this thesis reveals just how valuable this endeavour can be.

Rather than just being theoretical, this thesis also contributes to the academic field through the careful analysis of its rich and original empirical data. As a means of

understanding contemporary youth taste cultures, this study places young people's lived experiences at its heart, with methods designed specifically around their interests. In total, 112 people from the Norfolk region were involved in the study, with a further 28 taking part in an exploratory ethnography. By engaging with young people I have been able to develop an invaluable understanding of their taste cultures as well as the ways in which gender is (re)produced as part of them.

The empirical analysis of this thesis develops academic understanding across a diverse, yet complementary range of fields. In the first instance it develops the field of youth studies, speaking primarily to the youth studies strand that has focused on gender. This is a large and amorphous field, spanning studies of girls and girlhood, of which there is a burgeoning field of literature (Hains, 2012; Kearney, 2006; Aapola, Gonick and Harris, 2005; Harris, 2004a, Driscoll, 2002; Hey, 1997; McRobbie, 1991) as well as studies of boys and boyhood of which there has been a growing number of studies (Roberts, 2013; McCormack, 2012; Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman, 2002; Skelton, 2001). In recent years focus has also turned to the lives of queer young people (Driver, 2008). However, despite the wealth of literature in the field of youth gender studies there remains an absence of work that looks at more than just one gender. Work in the field of girlhood and boyhood studies has developed a rich understanding of the complexities of gender experienced by boys and girls, but what about the *relational* complexities of gender experienced by young people? I believe that we can learn a lot about how gender is (re)produced by thinking about gender relationally. There have of course been some important interventions in this field from scholars such as Nayak and Kehily (2008) and Thorne (1993), but on the whole gender is not explored holistically, and certainly hasn't been from a taste cultures approach. What I therefore show in this research is that through an all-inclusive study of gender and youth, we can place the tensions between masculinity and femininity that young people experience into better context. By not focusing on just one gender I am also able to

interrogate the complexities across genders, and by not reifying the gender binary I am able to think of gender in more fluid terms.

The reason that I am keen not to reify the gender binary is because I approach gender from a poststructuralist perspective. Inspired broadly by the work of Foucault (1995) I argue that identity is discursively (re)produced. This leads me more specifically to the work of Butler (2006), whose conceptualisation of gender performativity is one that inspires much of this thesis. However, rather than just thinking of the performance of gender, I am particularly interested in the role that the audience plays in the (re)production of gender. As a means of developing this understanding theoretically I draw on Goffman's (1971) work around presentation of the self. Through Goffman's interest in the audience I am able to develop a more nuanced analysis of collective understandings of gender within contemporary youth taste cultures. These accounts contribute to an original interpretation of youth and gender by exploring them in relation to taste cultures. In this respect I work from the premise that taste matters. This position has been well evidenced in Bourdieu's now iconic work *Distinction* (1984), and more recently in the works that it has inspired such as that from Bennett et al. (2009). However, I believe that we need to take taste much more seriously when it comes to understanding the (re)production of gender. One of the few studies that has made a significant intervention into the fields of both gender and taste is in the work of Skeggs. In Skeggs' (1997) *Formations of Class and Gender* a rich and complex understanding of gender in terms of taste and value has been established. By focusing on a different generational group (Skeggs explores adult women) and focusing on *age* and gender rather than gender and *class*, this thesis not only develops an understanding of the discursive (re)production of gender from a taste culture perspective, but does so with new empirical evidence.

The aforementioned academic fields are broad and amorphous, and so through their application to empirical evidence I have been able to significantly narrow them as a way of producing a meaningful contribution to the academic field. In this thesis I focus only on gender, and the young people I study come from the Norfolk region and are primarily around the age of fourteen. The questions that I am interested in asking are focused precisely on the discursive (re)production of gender in contemporary youth taste cultures. In designing the project I was interested to know whether the experience of taste cultures was different for those that present as boys and those that present as girls. When considering cultural texts in terms of value I was curious whether masculinity was understood in the same way as femininity, or if femininity has lesser value (given that the feminine is often trivialised). My final concern when designing the project was about the idea of gender appropriate taste. I wanted to know if young people saw some taste articulations as appropriate or inappropriate on the grounds of gender. These were all questions that I had not been able to find clear answers to in the academic literature and so developing a project that could uncover them was one of the main aims of this research. I believed that answers to these questions would allow me to develop an understanding of the (re)production of gender in contemporary youth taste cultures and I found this to be the case.

What was certain to me though was that I wanted to answer these questions empirically, designing methods that foregrounded the youth experience. This provides a much needed application of poststructuralist theories of gender to empirical analysis, filling a gap that Wood has identified as existing between these theories and empiricism, “it is time that the advances in post-structuralist thought are made to speak to our methodological approaches in feminist media studies” (2009: 111). However, as I show in Chapter Two taste cultures can also be difficult to capture empirically, with many only looking at preference and/or only exploring taste quantitatively. As a poststructural cultural

theorist I wanted to ensure that my methods were qualitative in their approach and emphasised meaning. I therefore designed some online identity pages that were structured in response to observations from an exploratory ethnography. As they were bespoke the identity pages used the principles of online social networking sites such as Bebo and Facebook, and provided me with rich qualitative details of not only the texts that young people engage with, but how they feel about them too. These findings were then used in the collection of focus group data, which foregrounded collective meaning making and emphasised discussions of gender appropriate and gender inappropriate taste. It is therefore in the richness of this empirical data, and the care with which it has been analysed that we can appreciate the contribution this thesis makes to the development of knowledge.

Thesis Structure

I work through the complex world of contemporary youth taste cultures by breaking this thesis into three broad sections, each contributing to our understanding and demonstrating the importance of this research. In the first section I bring together the diverse academic fields that allow me to present my argument for why we should be looking at taste cultures as a means of understanding the discursive (re)production of gender during youth. I work through poststructuralist accounts of identity, focusing on gender and youth and argue that all are (re)produced through discourse. I then make the case that taste is an important site of discursive (re)production, and that if we want to understand how gender is (re)produced then this is an area that we need to examine. As part of this I think about taste and value, and theorise why gendered value may be significant in understanding gender appropriate taste. The final component of this opening section is the discussion of my methodological approach. It is here that I show the creative way in which I have approached methods, thinking about what interests young people and

what would be the best way to answer my research questions. In the second section I reflect on some of the empirical data, providing insight into taste and gender in the context of the sample group. I discuss the findings from the identity page, I show why youth taste cultures matter and illuminate the ways in which young people conceive of gender in terms of the binary. This provides an essential backdrop to the final section, which provides a thorough and detailed analysis of the empirical evidence, revealing the ways in which gender is (re)produced in contemporary youth taste cultures. As part of this I explore what is valued in terms of masculinity and femininity, I work through different taste articulations, and consider how and/or why participants see particular articulations as being gender (in)appropriate. This allows me to illustrate just how differently taste is experienced by boys and girls.

Through this rich and innovative study I find that taste *does* matter in contemporary youth taste cultures and that gender is discursively (re)produced when taste is articulated. I argue that 'appropriate' articulations of taste (re)produce dominant gender discourses. Gender appropriate taste matters because high school is what I argue to be a 'hyper-regulatory space', and so young people are motivated to articulate appropriately and not be ostracised. I found that femininity was discursively de-valued and that many young people distanced themselves from it, and I also found that there were clear distinctions between femininity and masculinity. These findings are important because they reveal the persistence of gender divisions during youth. Taste cultures may appear trivial and inconsequential, but I reveal in this research that they are not innocuous; regulating and limiting the parameters of who and what young people can be in terms of gender.

**Section One: The Academic Context and
Methodological Approach**

Chapter One

Conceptualising Identity: Gender and Youth

I am concerned with how gender is (re)produced through taste articulation. I believe that through the examination of taste cultures we can better understand the (re)production¹ of gender. This is because it is through particular taste articulations being rendered gender 'appropriate' or 'inappropriate' the discourses of what 'gender' means are reinforced. The parameters of appropriate *taste* therefore require individuals to have an understanding of the parameters of appropriate *gender*. Following this, I argue that both taste and gender are inherently social and cultural entities, and that they only come into being when they are communicated. Taste and gender therefore inform one another and are (re)produced in the performance of identity.

To develop this argument further the following two chapters will set out my theoretical approach to the concepts of 'gender' and 'taste'. Generally, the concepts of gender and taste are the focus of distinct academic fields despite, I believe, not only being complementary to one another, but also having the potential to be highly informative when brought together. We can see the fruitfulness of bringing together theories of taste and gender in the case of Skeggs' (1997) foregrounding work in *Formations of Class and Gender*, but despite this work there remain relatively few studies that bring together these sites of analysis. The separation of these two academic fields provides both a challenge and an opportunity. In this research I demonstrate that the opportunities far outweigh the challenges, showing that for young people taste is highly informed by gender, helping us to

¹ I call it '(re)production' rather than 'production' or 'reproduction' because I believe that identity is simultaneously 'produced' and 'reproduced'. It is 'produced' in the moment in which it is performed, but it is also 'reproduced' in its (usually non-challenging) reference to existing discourses, 'reproducing' the discourses of already accepted versions of identity.

understand how and why binary discourses of gender are (re)produced in articulations of taste. However, this understanding does not overcome the challenges in the first instance of bringing together these concepts. To do this I work through the nuanced academic debates before pulling them together in my analysis of the empirical data that I have collected. In this chapter I consider the identities that are the focus of my investigation, gender and youth. Throughout I draw connections between my position and the wider academic field, showing how my research not only informs the existing field, but progresses it in its consideration of taste. It is in the following chapter, after my approach to these identities have been clarified, that I then begin to think about how theories of taste can progress our understanding of youth gender identities and their (re)production.

This thesis is influenced by a range of academic approaches from the cultural studies tradition; of these, feminism and poststructuralist approaches to discourse have had the greatest impact. My thesis is ultimately concerned with questions of identity, exploring how and why particular identities are (re)produced. I am not primarily concerned with technologies of the self (although this research could inform these debates), but rather I am interested in how discourses inform what subject positions can be taken up by young people and are collectively responded to. It is to these debates that I first turn.

1.1 Identity

Ontologically, I argue for an anti-essentialist account of the self that follows the poststructuralist position. To begin to make sense of this I draw upon the scholars Foucault, for his contribution to our understanding of discourse, and Butler for her 'troubling' of gender. I believe that there is no inherent 'essence' to oneself, meaning that I understand identity and identities to be unfixed and constituted within discourse rather than fixed within a knowable 'truth'. The individual is thus a 'tissue of textualities' (Barry, 2009: 63), a

fragmented product of cultural construction. As I explore below, I take the position that identity comes into being in the moment in which it is enacted. This allows us to see the importance of understanding how and why particular texts are used and understood as meaningful in the construction and (re)presentation of the self through identity. This is because despite this 'unfixedness' we do see the (re)production of particular identities. Through focus on taste cultures this thesis begins to answer how these discourses of gender are (re)produced.

By positioning myself within this framework I argue that identities are fluid, shifting, changeable and ultimately contextually contingent. I reject the idea that meanings are fixed and I am therefore interested in understanding how, despite this lack of fixedness, particular meanings come to be worked out and (re)produced. This follows the idea that identity is a 'complex mixture of chosen allegiances' (as discussed by Barry, 2009: 140), which raises questions of what allegiances are made, at what time, and why. In following the claim made above, that the individual is a 'tissue of textualities', we can come to understand identity as a process of articulation. This is because it is in articulation that these textualities can be known. Crucial to this is Butler's idea that 'identity is a signifying practice' (Butler, 1990: 145), which requires sets of identifications. In this thesis I argue that one of the ways we can understand these identifications is through taste articulation, which requires one to not only align oneself with particular discourses, but also dis-identify with others. However, unlike a number of poststructuralist theorists of the past I am not concerned with taking a psychoanalytic approach and concerning this thesis with questions of the unconscious and its dynamics (see Redman, 2000: 13). This is because I am primarily concerned with what happens at the social level, exploring how meaning is collectively produced and reproduced. This follows the poststructuralist work of Nayak and Kehily who argue that it is *discursive* production that forms "an *organising principle* in peer group relations in school" (2006: 460, emphasis in original). Thinking about discourse as

able to provide an 'organising principle' can therefore help us to begin to make sense of how discourses of gender are (re)produced and can be temporarily stabilised in contemporary youth taste cultures.

I understand discourses as being central to social life, providing a means through which to understand not only how identity is (re)produced, but also how particular versions of identity become privileged. Following the claim that identities are produced *within* rather than *outside* of discourse (Hall, 2000: 17) I argue that there is great importance in interrogating and deconstructing the discourses that produce gender. I align myself with Griffin (1993) who does not see poststructural accounts of discourse and the idea of hegemony as being incompatible. I will argue below that the concept of hegemony, which not only conceals power but makes it appear natural (Gramsci, 1979), can be very useful for thinking about the (re)production of particular versions of gender under patriarchy. What the idea of discourse provides us is a way of understanding how identity is produced, revealing, what Griffin calls "sets of rules and practices through which power is legitimated" (1993: 7). However, Griffin does not see discourses as "dominant *or* subordinate" (1993: 7, emphasis in original) and while I do not see discourses in binary, I posit throughout this thesis the claim that some discourses *are* dominant, but may not be *permanently* dominant. This differs from Griffin's approach as her understanding of discourses as "a system of statements which constructs an object" (1993: 7) flattens the tensions between the ideas of gender, particularly in terms of the consequences for those that deviate and transgress. Meanwhile, Hall argues that while poststructural accounts tell us much about how subject positions are constructed through discourse, they "reveal little about why it is that certain individuals occupy some subject positions rather than others" (2000: 23). This is something that is also highlighted by Wood, who argues that poststructuralist accounts of gender as a performance (such as those posited by Butler) are accounts that have "rarely been brought to bear upon the temporalities of media reception and its links with identity formation"

(2009: 6). This thesis addresses these shortcomings by using empirical evidence to work through the discourses of gender that young people (re)produce when discussing taste. I consider the power that is at play and examine the potential consequences for transgression that highlight the dominance of some discourses over others. The idea of regulation, “the process by which persons become regular” (Butler, 2004: 40) is important as we can begin to think about how discourse can be regulative and regulated (Hall, 2000: 24), which further informs our understanding of how identity is (re)produced.

One of the ways in which academics have applied this account of identity to the lived experiences of individuals is by looking at the relationship between identity and culture. For example, Gauntlett has argued that the “presentation of identity is a dynamic process” (2007: 9) and popular culture (a focus in this thesis) is arguably a site where individuals experiment with new identities (Lipstiz, 1994: 62). It is *how* and *what* we select to represent ourselves that is key to our understanding of social transformations (Budgeon, 2003a), and so gives us an important reason to explore these articulations of identity within empirical research. In thinking about this poststructuralist account of identity and cultural consumption, Hesmondhalgh, drawing on Bennett, suggests that we think of identity as voluntaristic, whereby they are constructed through active consumption (2005: 26). Cultural consumption emerges then as a central site for thinking about how identity is articulated. However, the implication in these accounts is that identity is therefore an individualistic activity, overlooking the collective negotiation of discourses and the power over meaning that they have. I suggest along the lines of Turino (2008) that the relationship individuals have with cultural texts is more complex than this, involving both identification and dis-identification, requiring the individual to have an understanding of what texts *mean* within the wider cultural context.

There are cases where we can see that some social groups choose to emphasise particular elements of their identity. For example, when referring to Spivak, Lipsitz suggests that “individuals and groups may choose to emphasize their common history [...] that overlooks the heterogeneity of the group in order to build a unity” (1994: 62). It is in this enactment, or emphasis, of particular ‘essential’ elements of identity through strategic essentialism that we are able to witness their performance, and thus the very artifice of them. For example, in the form of the women’s movement or the civil rights movement we can see that individuals reduce their “complex selves to a few emphasized aspects that are projected as fundamental and immutable” (Turino, 2008: 104). We can apply this understanding to youth and gender, allowing us to think about how identities appear as ‘natural’, when instead a complex series of discursive negotiations have led to their cultural (re)production. In the ability to reduce particular elements of the self, while emphasising others, the fluidity and subjectivity of contemporary identities is highlighted, far more so than essentialist accounts of the self would allow.

1.1.1 Gender

There are a range of cultural identities that one could investigate in relation to youth and taste, but my focus is on gender in this thesis. My methodological approach means that future research can use this framework to explore alternative and/or intersecting identities.² It is important to note that I do not believe that contemporary cultural identities exist in isolation from one another, instead we must think of them as engaged in a complex relationship informing and informed by the identities they intersect with (and the discourses that (re)produce them). When thinking about gender for example, we must be cautious that we do not ignore the intersections of other cultural identities, nor should

² This is discussed further in Chapter Three.

investigators of these other social identities ignore the intersection they have with gender. Intersectionality is therefore of importance to this thesis as it contends that “different dimensions of social life cannot be separated into discrete and pure strands” (Brah and Phoenix, 2004: 76). Thus, whatever identity we explore in relation to gender, be that class, race, sexuality, or in this case *age*, it is important to remember that these identities are also intersectional. At different moments in time the discourses that (re)produce each identity will vary depending on the context. The complexities of intersectional identities and the necessary focus needed of this thesis means that I am not able to give justice to all of the identities the participants in this study negotiate, highlighting an unavoidable limitation to this study.

The question then becomes the ‘so what?’ one, why should we be interested in how and why gender in particular is (re)produced by young people? To answer this question I draw on my position as a feminist to outline the politics of gender in relation to the subordination of women and the marginalisation of the feminine. In the first instance I argue that it is crucial for us to deconstruct the ‘artifice’ of femininity (Bartky, 1990), which in its association with womanhood normalises women’s subordinate position within society in relation to men. If contemporary gender is discursively (re)produced then there is a continuing need to question the ways in which they are (re)produced, especially as there is persistent gender inequality within British society. In the opening lines of this thesis I referred to some sobering issues of gender politics facing young people in Britain, and recent reports from the Girl Guides about inequality and sexism (Girlguiding, 2013) as well as Everyday Sexism (Bates, 2013) and ‘Lad Culture’ at university (NUS, 2012) the need to interrogate issues of gender facing young people is demonstrated. In understanding how gender differences are discursively sustained within youth cultures (a point of intersection in itself), we also can begin to make sense of the ways in which these distinctions of gender are carried into adult life. This is not to say that the discourses of gender (re)produced by

young people will be the same or different from adult discourses of gender, but rather “in exploring youth identity construction we are glimpsing the *new* adulthood” (White and Wyn, 2004: 184, emphasis added). From a poststructuralist position, Nayak and Kehily usefully describe schools as a space where “gendered performances are commonly treated as adolescent rehearsals for the main show to be staged with the onset of adulthood” (2006: 471).

However, existing academic literature indicates that by exploring youth in particular, we may be able to glimpse transgression and change, as it has been argued that “young people can tell us a lot about the scale and dynamics of social change” (McRobbie, 1994: 179). In understanding gender to be arbitrary, youth becomes an interesting site to think about the (re)production of gender, as youth is considered to be “one of the most likely sites where prevailing ideas about identity and status are questioned, suspended or reversed” (Hesmondhalgh, 2005: 37). Youth therefore provides a rich site for the examination of gender (re)production, providing the potential for change in relation to gender and the gender binary. However, given the persistence of the gender binary I am not so convinced that youth *de facto* provides a space for change and transgression. Part of this belief is because “gender is not simply a matter of choice, but a negotiation that occurs within a matrix of social and historical forces” (Nayak and Kehily, 2008: 5), indicating the need to understand and make sense of these forces. Further to this, Järviluoma, Moisala and Vilkkö have argued that gender is “not an innocent social category or an unimportant aspect of our identity” (2003: 6). Gender continues to limit who and what we can be. Gender is a crucial site of academic interrogation because “it may open doors in our lives, limit or broaden our possibilities to live our lives to the fullest” (Järviluoma, Moisala and Vilkkö, 2003: 6). Developing an understanding of how these discourses are (re)produced and the way in which they regulate can therefore allow us to

see how this unequal distribution of power is sustained within contemporary youth cultures and beyond.

Following the ontological position that I have set out above, I follow the anti-essentialist feminist conceptualisation of gender. In this I reject essentialist accounts of sex and gender, arguing that while produced in discourse they are nevertheless two distinct and highly differentiated categories that are often problematically used interchangeably. To account for these distinctions it is useful to think about how male/female and feminine/masculine have been deployed differently within cultural theory in different ways. While ideas of 'male' and 'female' are often (problematically as I discuss below) rooted within biologically determined accounts of sex/gender, masculinity and femininity is understood to be the 'cultural' versions of these biological 'realities'. Järviluoma, Moisala and Vilkkö have defined femininity as being an "umbrella term for all the different ways in which women are defined by others and themselves" (2006: 17), and in general the same can be said for masculinity. These definitions are useful as they are able to account for the differences in and within femininity and masculinity, but they also tie gender to biological bodies. As I discuss in greater depth in relation to girls and boys below, I understand masculinity and femininity as gendered ideas based on the expectations that people inscribe into texts (including bodies). In rejecting the structuralist binary, I see masculinity and femininity as operating on a spectrum, where 'traditional' accounts of 'hard' masculinity as and 'soft' femininity are located on either end, but interact with one another as they meet in the middle. The complexities of these distinctions are elucidated in much greater depth in Section Three of this thesis, where I consider boys/girls, masculine/feminine in relation to the lived realities of young people.

In Oakley's work she argues that "technology has altered the necessity of biology on society, but our conceptions of masculinity and femininity have shown no corresponding

tendency to change” (1972: 16). This claim demonstrates the power of discourse in the (re)production of gender, raising questions of how these discourses are sustained, particularly as some forty years have passed since this claim was first made. It is in asking these questions we are drawn to Simone De Beauvoir’s now iconic assertion that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (1973: 301). To add nuance to this claim I also contend that if gender is articulated in the form of femininity or masculinity then so too must manhood, whereby one is not born, but rather becomes, a man. This deviates somewhat from Beauvoir (1972) as she argues that man is simply ‘normal’. Although masculinity may exist as culturally superior to femininity, this thesis follows the scholars that understand it as nevertheless subject to similar discursive processes as femininity (Robb, 2007; Connell, 1995). However, such accounts continue to operate on binaries, suggesting that female/male and feminine/masculine are the only possibilities for individuals in the (re)production of gender, which normalises a cisgender account in the process.³ I understand the term cisgender to be applicable to those people whose experience of gender matches that which they were assigned at birth. Cis, which means ‘on the same side of’ is thus conceptually useful for thinking about gender expression that ‘matches’ biology/sex. Cis is a privilege within a society that understands gender as a fixed-binary because cisgender people are able to ‘be’ male or female simply because they have been ‘born’ and raised as that particular sex (Serano, 2007). Schilt and Westbrook have argued that gender trouble is rupturing for cisgender people, and so “normatively gendered tactics that reify gender and sexual difference” (2009: 442) are deployed. It is my contention that tastes are one of these gendered tactics. I am therefore keen to open our understanding of gender to one that draws on queer theory to think about gender as fully artificial. With this in mind I ask the question that if one *becomes* a particular gender, what

³ In this study I refer to gendered young people as ‘boys’ and ‘girls’, this is because the focus group participants all presented as either male or female. I note in the recommendations that there is a need to engage empirically with queer and non-binary young people using this perspective.

is to say that the gender they become matches their physiology, and indeed what is to say that their physiology is fixed in any kind of knowable 'truth' anyway? To explore this question in greater depth I now turn to queer conceptions of gender, with the aim of demonstrating why discourse is so important to understanding the (re)production of narrow and binary ideas of gender.

Queering Gender

Queer theorists have challenged binary accounts of gender for some time (Driver, 2008; Halberstam, 2005; Butler, 1993) and this thesis aims to develop this body of work. If gender is an artifice, understanding how this artifice is discursively (re)produced through something as everyday as taste, can tell us much about the state of gender in contemporary youth cultures. My position is one that understands gender as an artifice that is (re)produced through iteration, and that taste as used in iteration. As I discuss in the following chapter, taste is therefore both an articulation and a resource in the (re)production of gender.

I use the idea of 'queer' in the account of gender that I employ in this thesis as it "signif[ies] performative dynamics of doing rather than determinate identities" (Driver, 2008: 10). This is useful as it deconstructs the idea of identity being determinate, emphasising instead its constructed nature. For Butler, "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender [...] identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (1990: 25). Butler's work is so useful in developing my position within this thesis because it not only posits a poststructuralist account of gender, but it develops this by emphasising the importance of iteration. In terms of the questions my thesis asks, iteration helps us to understand how gender is (re)produced within culture despite being an artificial and culturally constructed category.

The emphasis is therefore placed upon 'performativity', "the ways in which identity is enacted through iterative practices" (Redman, 2000: 13).

While I do not specifically examine the *performance* of gender, choosing instead to focus on the discourses that are employed in reading performances, thinking of the performative nature of identity is nevertheless a useful one for this thesis. This is because it allows us to take seriously the examination of cultural discourses, as it is *here* rather than in the *body* that gender is (re)produced. Determinist accounts of gender are thus troubled, and our attention is shifted to the cultural processes through which gender is (re)produced. I do not however believe that the body is therefore meaningless. Instead I argue that the meaning of the body is also not fixed, and as with other aspects of gender it is an 'idea' and an "inscribed surface of events" (Foucault, 1984: 83). If, as I have argued above, identity is a 'tissue of textualities', then the body is just one of the many texts, but is nevertheless an important one as it is "a medium through which the discursive signs of gender are given corporeal significance" (Nayak and Kehily, 2006: 468). This is because gender is often attributed on the basis of the body. Following the notable work of Kessler and McKenna (1978) gender is attributed to people on the basic understanding that everyone is male or female, and that there is therefore something 'male' and 'female' about everyone. Gender therefore is attributed to people in the binary, and gender is usually presented in this way too (unless a queer performance is given). Bodies play one role in this attribution of gender. To use the language of value that I develop in the following chapter, I understand the body as having gendered value. The ways in which someone chooses to present themselves and the gender they are attributed in relation to the dominant discourses of gender will play a role in how their articulation of taste is understood. I see this as gender appropriate or inappropriate as I argue that symbolic resources (namely, cultural texts) also have gendered value. For example, if one is attributed female, discourses of gender

appropriateness assume that feminine taste articulations will be (re)produced, performing what Nayak and Kehily term “the choreography of appropriate gender” (2006: 470).

Ideas of performance draw on wider academic work that has been inspirational in the formation of this thesis. In particular Goffman’s (1971) dramaturgical account of the presentation of the self and West and Zimmerman’s (1987) idea of ‘doing gender’ have provided invaluable conceptual tools in developing my understanding of how and why the articulations made in performance are so important. Butler’s concepts are incredibly useful as they de-stabilise gender, but they are also limited in their empirical applicability. This is because in Butler’s position as a radical philosopher, it can often be difficult to apply her ideas to ‘lived’ situations. West and Zimmerman’s (1987) work captures the spirit of Butler (or vice versa, given that their work preceded Butler’s), but does so in a way that explicates the importance of thinking about appropriateness. This is to say that their contribution is in highlighting the significance not just of the individual and their performance of gender, but of the wider cultural implications of this performance. In this work they argue that gender is “the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one’s sex activity” (West and Zimmerman, 1987: 127). ‘Doing’ gender to borrow their term involves particular ‘appropriate’ performances. To return to the ideas discussed above, I argue that what can be known as ‘appropriate’ is discursively (re)produced, and interrogating the discourses of *gendered* appropriateness is a central aim of this thesis.

The final theoretical contribution that helps us to understand the importance of considering appropriateness in the (re)production of gender comes from the work of Goffman. Goffman’s approach falls under ‘role theory’, and role theory is useful for thinking about gender because “[r]oles are defined by expectations and norms, sex roles by expectations attaching to biological status” (Connell, 2005: 25). However, this also

demonstrates the problematic way in which performances can be fixed to discourses of biology. Goffman's dramaturgical accounts of identity as performance can however help us to think about the strategies that social actors employ in order to perform 'appropriate' articulations of taste. Additionally, dramaturgical accounts also help us to see the ways in which the audiences of these performances receive them. This account offers a useful distinction from Butler's account as it offers the individual more agency than Butler's 'repetitive iteration' (see Evans, 2006: 550). But most importantly, what Goffman's approach does that Butler's does not is account for the audience. Evans notes that, in Goffman's understanding, "performances of gendered identities are not isolated individual performances for the self, but are performed for, and received and regulated by others" (2006: 550), and this is central to the basis of my thesis. Butler's account is so useful because it helps us to see the performativity of gender, and the central role that discourse plays in this. What Goffman's theories offer us in addition to this is an application to a wider context, a context in which those that receive this performance are accounted for. This thesis deals primarily with the audience, as it is the audience and their collective strategies of sense-making that I am interested in exploring.

Within Goffman's role theory (1971), we understand individuals (or social 'actors') as assuming roles like actors in a play, whereby observers are required to "believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess [...] and that in general things are as they appear to be" (1971: 28). To refer back to Butler's (1990) theories, the understanding developed is one whereby articulations are iterative of existing discourses of gender, as it is only in *slippages* that gender is 'troubled'. However, Goffman can help us to acknowledge the importance of the audience in identifying these 'slippages'. Goffman suggests that when the individual "presents himself before others, his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society" (1959: 45). I believe that the idea of 'official' or 'accredited' values would be better

thought of in terms of discourses, with dominant discourses being those that are (re)produced in the performance of identity. I return to these theories of appropriateness in the following chapter, where I consider the idea of 'appropriate taste' in greater depth. Nevertheless, I have demonstrated the usefulness here of queering gender to highlight the artificiality of it, and then placing these understandings within the framework that Goffman provides. In bringing these theories together and drawing out the ideas that are mutually compatible we are able to conceive of gender identity as not only performed, but as read by an audience. This strengthens my claim that we must pay careful attention to the complexities of the (re)production of gender. This is because gender is (re)produced not only in the performances by an individual, but also in the reading of these performances by audience members. The symbolic resources that are used in these exchanges are thus of central importance, as it is through them that I believe we can see one of the sites of the (re)production of gender.

When thinking about gender in relation to youth, which is integral to this thesis, it is important to note the conclusions from Nayak and Kehily's ethnography that "for youth the performance of gender and its imaginary attachments to 'masculinity' and 'femininity' are different to those of adults or the aged" (2008: 175) and this is also the case within specifically queer youth cultures too (Driver, 2008). This leads us to ask the question of what makes youth so distinctive. I understand part of youth's distinctiveness to be located in their creativity, particularly in their consumption of culture (McRobbie, 1994). In this following section I examine the ways in which youth has been approached and conceptualised, arguing that we should consider youth within the same poststructuralist terms that we do gender. I then consider the point at which the identities of youth and gender (and discourses that (re)produce them) intersect, and the potential impact this may have on the (re)production of gender.

1.1.2 Youth

'Youth' is a particularly problematic term within cultural studies as it is often used with little critical engagement of what the word 'youth' really means. My use of the term 'youth' in and of itself is not a neutral one, placing my work within a specific academic field (and distancing myself from others). In terms of gendered youth my use of the terms 'girl' and 'boy' are ones that attempt to reflect the generational genderings of those that fit into these categories, and will be reflected upon in the sections on gender and youth that follow. I believe that young people exist within a distinct social and cultural context, where the experience of 'being young' will differ greatly in terms of time, place as well as intersecting identities. This is because there is no 'one' essential experience of youth, and while in this thesis I focus on how gender impacts on experiences of youth, so too will race, sexuality, class and ability.

Thorne (1993) has articulated some of the complexities of talking about 'young people' as a group and questioned some of the political implications these lexical choices may have. Thorne, who was working with fourth and fifth graders⁴ who are thus considerably younger than the year nine's⁵ that I worked with, found that age-generic terms were rarely used by her participants, and when they were, the word 'kids' was overwhelmingly used over the word 'children' (1993: 9). In this work, Thorne argues that terms such as 'peer group' flattens the experience of young people, and children "evokes the "adult ideological viewpoint"" (1993: 9). There are a range of words that I could use in my discussion of young people, but all of them are loaded with wider meanings, and so a brief reflection on this will be useful.

⁴ 9-10 years old.

⁵ 13-14 years old.

As a poststructuralist I am uneasy at the thought of using the word 'youth' interchangeably with other words such as 'adolescence' or 'teenagers'. This is because while all of the meanings attached to these words are arbitrary, they nevertheless have distinct connotations that impact how they can be conceptualised within research. For example, the word adolescent is tied up with biologically deterministic accounts (Griffin, 1993: 17), and 'teenagers' reduces an individual to a fixed temporal moment in their life. This conceptualisation of youth as a fixed identity is therefore a problem for poststructuralists. Given the interest in youth as a cultural category within cultural studies it is therefore interesting that so few scholars have been reflexive about the cultural construction of youth. My observation of the field is that scholars tend to be far more essentialist in their conceptualisation of youth as an identity than they are with other identities such as gender or sexuality, where the legacy of feminism has required a critical attention of their construction. The biological fixing of youth can therefore have a wide ranging impact on our conceptualisation of identity.

The very idea of 'adolescence' did not come into being until the mid-nineteenth century, alongside changes in the educational system and the industrial revolution. Through Hall's understanding of adolescence as a "physiological state triggered by the onset of puberty" (cited in Griffin, 1993: 15) we can come to see the *biological* basis of this term. Griffin has argued that research about youth and adolescence since this time has become "an amorphous and sprawling body of work" (1993: 18). To synonymise adolescence with youth is to the detriment of our understanding of young people. This is not only because the youth experience is essentialised to a series of biological developments, but also because these biological developments further entrench discourses of the biological (cis)gender binary. For example, Griffin argues that "[t]he biological dimension generally refers to the development of 'normal' genital (hetero)sexuality, reproductive capacity (especially for young women) and/or more generalized hormonal

surges" (1993: 20). Following this, Lesko has discussed how youth has been characterised by 'hormonal' accounts, evidenced in the physiological changes such as "height and weight spurts, breasts, deeper voices, facial hair and broader hips" (2012: 3). The problem within this biological account of youth is not only in its heterosexism and assumption of a gender dichotomy, but also in the refusal to consider the role of discourse as a way of making sense of these bodily experiences (that are *usually*, but not *universally* experienced). I am therefore keen to queer the account of youth by unfixing it from its biological basis, emphasising instead its discursive (re)production. Bodily changes within the 'period' of youth can only be understood as 'youthful' when they are discursively (re)produced as so, and thus I dislodge youth from this fixed location into one that is as artificial and iterative as gender.

A further way in which the definition of youth is fixed within biology is through a problematic connection to age. While I agree with Lesko when she says that "adolescence is made in and through the passage of time" (2001: 4) as all generations are, to think about youth in this way problematically places a vast and varying group into a large and homogenous one. What is it about the years 12-18 that lead us to think about youth? Where do the boundaries of these distinctions lie? To think of youth as synonymous with teenagers is too rigid, applying only to those between the ages of 13-19. When talking about a broad social group do we, as researchers, want to be so heavily constrained? Approaches that use a biological or temporal understanding of youth are useful for thinking of the *signifiers* of youth. However, when applied to a definition without consideration of the wider implications of the cultural construction of *biology* and *temporality* then I believe we are selling ourselves short, both epistemologically and ontologically. This is because young people exist within a distinct social and cultural context, informed by their intersecting identities. Thus, the lived experience of a thirteen year old will be markedly different to that of a seventeen year old within one cultural context, let alone when

thinking outside of Western culture, or in a different period of time. When undertaking cultural studies youth research, regardless of whether we look texts or lived experiences, we need to be able to justify our sampling and I argue that we cannot do this without consideration of the context of the young people that we are referring to in our research.

One of the ways in which age *and* culture have been applied to a working-definition of youth that is culturally sensitive can be seen in analyses of marketing, with White and Wyn noting that “youth identity is both a media and marketing construction” (2004: 184). Notions of what falls into the category of youth are often normalised by marketing categories, with young people and ‘tweens’ the targeted consumers of particular cultural products (Cook and Kaiser, 2004; Siegel, Coffey and Livingstone, 2004). However, while a marketing approach allows us to understand *who* may fall into the category of youth and through its focus on culture allows us to think about youth in more fluid terms, this too is not without its problems. For example, Hesmondhalgh has argued that “many of the people involved in cultural activities which seemed to be engaged in by youth are actually in their 20s and 30s” (2005: 37). This reminds us to be cautious when making assumptions about youth in relation to cultural texts and their consumption, highlighting the need to engage with audiences directly to better understanding the relationship between consumption and the discursive (re)production of ‘youth’.

Early cultural studies investigations of young people were primarily concerned with ‘youth’ as a problematic social category, with the Chicago School providing one of the earliest accounts of youth as ‘delinquent’ and subcultural in nature. Within a British context the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies has had a profound influence, not only on the tradition of British cultural studies, but of youth studies more specifically. The focus on subculture that emerged from the Centre transformed how young people have been thought of and subsequently researched. This is because emphasis was on the relationship

between youth and cultural consumption, often highlighting the ways in which young people rejected dominant cultural discourses (Hebdige's (1979) work on style is exemplary of this). However, in this emphasis on rejection, Corrigan and Frith have argued that "the sociology of youth culture has mostly been the prerogative of deviance theorists" (2006: 195), which I argue overlooks the nuances of the youth experience, particularly as not *all* young people are 'deviant' nor do they engage with culture in 'deviant' ways. Nevertheless, the subversion of cultural discourses through the creative uses of cultural products allows us to think about the ways in which youth exists as an important site of 'cultural innovation' (McRobbie, 1994: 179), as well as the ways in which "the study of popular culture is intimately connected to the study of youth culture" (Hesmondhalgh, 2005: 21). Therefore, through the investigation of youth we are able to find a space where cultural discourses are not only reproduced, but also challenged. However, by thinking of youth as almost synonymous with subcultures, the subversive potential of youth has been exoticised, and this is something that I hope I have avoided in this study. This is because I believe it is problematic and over-simplistic to focus solely on subversion within youth as this leads to a disproportionate focus on subculture and overlooks some of the more mundane and everyday cultural practices that young people engage in. Subcultures are distinct cultural groups and are thus only experienced by relatively few people. While academic investigation into subcultures has been highly informative in understanding creative consumption and subversion, we must be careful not to think of youth cultures as *subcultures*. It would be problematic to do so not only because it dismisses the complex and nuanced differences *in* and *between* subcultures, but it also because it overlooks the important point that not all subcultures are exclusively occupied by young people. What I aim to do in this thesis is recognise the contribution of subcultural theory, but to conceive of youth in less divided terms.

An alternative approach might be to follow the 'youth transitions' body of work as adopted by researchers such as Thomson (2011), which is concerned with the transitions young people undergo in the movement from school to work. However, drawing on my position as a poststructuralist I follow the criticisms that posit that the transitions approach is "mechanical, positivistic and somewhat linear" in nature (Nayak and Kehily, 2008: 14). Therefore the focus that I place on discourses requires that I develop a working conception of youth that recognises these approaches, but instead thinks of these 'transitions' as being discursively (re)produced rather than being inherent within the experience of youth.

Here, I have challenged essentialist accounts of youth and the ways in which they overlook the discourses that produce these assumptions. I instead argue that we need to develop a constructivist account of youth, understanding it to be an identity that is subject to the same discursive (re)production as gender. There is nevertheless something that is tangible and visible about youth. It seems that we know it when we see it, yet when it comes to describing *it*, it becomes incredibly difficult. I believe that this shows the ingrainedness of these cultural discourses. Age, or indeed generation, may be discursively (re)produced, and these discourses signal a number of practices and cultures that distinguish a particular generational group from another. However, in de-stabilising youth I have complicated the practicalities of undertaking youth research, particularly in terms of selecting a sample. As I argue in the methodology chapter of this thesis (Chapter Three), I believe that as researchers we do need to place limits on our samples despite these complexities. In such instances I emphasise the importance of reflexivity, and recognition that our choices have been informed by discourses that are ultimately arbitrary. Methodologically I am therefore taking account of the cultural discourses that regulate people that are physiologically 'young', and thus drawing on a notion of "youth as a life phase in Western cultures" (Kehily, 2007: 12). This allows me to place some limits on 'youth' as a relational social group. With this in mind, my study focuses on individuals between the

ages of twelve and sixteen, with an in-depth focus on fourteen year olds. This is because it is at these ages that we can start to glimpse the negotiation of discourses by a group that have been seen as offering the potential for resistance and change (Hesmondhalgh, 2005; McRobbie, 1994). I recognise that these boundaries are arbitrary, but as I discuss in Chapter Three, they are necessary in order to develop a workable and meaningful research project.

These discussions of youth as a cultural construct can only tell us so much about the lives of young people in relation to my research interests of taste and gender. While the following chapter explicates the ways in which this thesis contributes to debates about taste, in the remainder of this chapter I present my position in relation to the debates that surround youth and gender. To do so requires negotiating my poststructuralist approach in relation to the diverse academic field that has asked questions of youth gender identities.

1.2 Gender and Youth

By returning to the idea of gender we are able to see an area of academic debate that recognises the resistive nature of young people, while not automatically placing them within a subcultural context. This is of particular importance when we consider the discursive (re)production of gender. For example, in Thomas' (2008) study of teenage girls' articulation of femininity she found that the girls in her study gained strength in the resistance of masculine pressures (2008: 67), and also in the resistance of the femininities enacted by their mothers. Meanwhile, studies have started to challenge the idea that boys are tightly regulated by hegemonic masculinities (which I discuss below), and instead greater inclusivity is starting to 'free up' potential enactments of masculinity (McCormack, 2012; Anderson, 2009). These studies indicate the potential offered by exploring the intersection between gender and generation, but as the above examples indicate, the vast

majority of these studies separate boys and girls and masculinity and femininity. In doing so, such approaches inevitably reproduce a gender binary, which demonstrates a challenge in how I present my contribution to these fields that are primarily divided along gendered lines. This exemplifies a much greater issue within youth gender studies, as by investigating *just* masculinity and/or boys, or *just* femininity and/or girls or indeed *just* queer youth, the nuances of the spaces in between can be lost. This demonstrates a much wider contribution of my research to the field of youth gender studies. In drawing together the experiences of those that identify as any gender (although in the focus groups all did present as boys or girls) and investigating them using the analytical tools offered by poststructuralism, a nuanced understanding of contemporary youth gender identities is developed. The need to do this *now* is well articulated by Currie, Kelly and Pomerantz, who argue that “as traditional markers of ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’ are being challenged, what it means to be a ‘gendered subject’ is a matter of everyday as well as scholarly speculation” (2011: 293).

In the first instance, however, I am keen to ensure that we do not overlook the important academic contributions that emerge through focus on just one gender identity. This is because although a gender binary that I conceive of as being problematic is (re)produced, such studies can still tell us much about the experience of gender within youth. Thus despite its limitations I will turn to the studies of girls and femininity before turning to the studies of boys and masculinity, drawing out the theoretical strands that inform my empirical analysis.

1.2.1 Conceptualising Girlhood: The intersection of youth and femininity

In the first instance I outline why I have chosen to use the word 'girl'. I am keen to distance the female participants from the biology inferred in the word 'female' as well as the way in which 'young woman' places girls in a particular stage on the path to (inevitable) womanhood. I also find the word 'child' problematic as it is not only genderless (in the most part), but it is not a word that is found to have resonance with young people themselves (see Thorne, 1993). I instead seek to highlight the constructedness of both youth and gender through the use of the term 'girl' in this thesis. I understand 'girl' as referring to a particular way of being young and gendered as female (and thus discursively connected with femininity). Importantly I see girl as not being an *essentially* female category. Nevertheless, I acknowledge that, as with femininity, the concept of 'girl' is 'slippery' and not unproblematic (Harris, 2004a: xx), but I feel that this slipperiness is part of its strength, and one that I feel captures at least some of the nuances of youth and gender when viewed from a poststructuralist perspective.

Following this, a surprisingly large number of studies and theories that are concerned with the nature of femininity pay little or no attention to what 'femininity' is, as a concept, theory, or 'lived category' (see Paechter (2012) for a discussion of this). Meanwhile Gill and Scharff note that there has been a wealth of academic writing about 'hegemonic masculinity', with little (if anything) written on 'hegemonic femininity' (2011: 2). To capture the complexity of this we need to consider the *value* of femininity. This is because as the concept of hegemony primarily speaks to concerns of power and the way in which domination is accepted as part of the status quo (Gramsci, 1979). As such we can start to understand how discourses of the feminine as valueless may be (re)produced. I discuss this in much greater depth in the following chapter which is concerned with taste and value, but it is useful to mention here because it helps us to understand how and why the study and conceptualisation of femininity has taken a different path to that of masculinity. The concept of femininity has been at the centre of intense feminist scrutiny

from the early-stages of the second-wave up to this day, and rather than working within the parameters of femininity, many feminists have sought to dispose of the category altogether (Gauntlett, 2008: 11). When this is considered in relation to the suspicions of older feminists and the ‘trappings’ of femininity (Baumgardner and Richards, 2004: 61), we can come to understand how and why femininity operates in a very distinct context to masculinity, and thus why it may still be useful to investigate femininity separately.

In the past, understanding femininity has, broadly speaking, “address[ed] the qualities of being female, which are varied, multiple and time-place contingent, but are normalised along a social spectrum of social acceptability of what it is ‘to be a woman’” (Thomas, 2008: 64). Following my poststructuralist position I argue that these ideas of what it means to be ‘female’ are discursively (re)produced. I discuss in the empirical chapters how these discourses are (re)produced by young people to make sense of their peers’ taste cultures. The subordinate position that femininity occupies in relation to masculinity (regardless of the internal hierarchies within these categories) makes femininity a less than desirable subject position to occupy. Seeing how girls (in particular) negotiate femininities is therefore a particularly interesting one and has been the subject of considerable academic debate not just over the years (Walkerdine, 1997; McRobbie, 1991; Griffin, 1985), but in more recent years too (Hains, 2012; Orenstein, 2012; Harris, 2004b; Driscoll, 2002). While illuminating, these explorations of youth femininity and girlhood rarely (if at all) consider the role that masculinity plays in girls’ negotiations, an area that this thesis aims to redress.

Many of the discussions in these works view girls as being active meaning makers, evaluating and adapting their versions of femininity in relation to the dominant discourses of both masculinity and generation. For example in Blackman’s (1998) ethnography of new wave girls (a subcultural group) he noted that ‘inappropriate’ school uniform, creative

rejections of patriarchy through subversive poetry, and lesbian displays (1998: 208-216) demonstrate some of the means through which femininities have been resisted. However, Blackman's study focused on a niche subculture that only followed a minority of girls, indicating some of the limitations of overemphasising the youth/subculture relationship. Additionally, these girls were presented as the *exception* to the rule, and thus if we think about the discourses of gender, an account of what femininity *should* be is nevertheless (re)produced in such moments of transgression. Thus, by looking at Hey's (1997) ethnography undertaken around the same time as Blackman's, we can see how girls enact differing resistances in their forms of femininity outside of explicitly subcultural activity. For Hey, resistances could be seen in the form of 'rituals of exclusion' such as not passing a note to a particular girl from the group in class or ostracising certain girls from the group (cited in Nayak and Kehily, 2008: 11). This contrasts with some of the more visual and extraordinary subversions such as those often enacted in subcultures. This demonstrates the nuances between understanding the subversion of gender norms for subcultural girls compared to more 'mainstream' girls. I am therefore cautious to ensure that within this study I do not think of young people as *just* subcultural or *just* mainstream, as the above studies suggest that it may be more complex than these potentially binary and dividing categories would allow. Girlhood studies demonstrates the breadth of cultural diversities experienced by girls, and this thesis progresses this literature by firmly placing boys into the picture too.

The postfeminist context, in which contemporary girls can be seen to be located, has been cited as having a particularly important impact on the lives of young people, particularly in terms of how discourses of femininity are negotiated. It has been suggested that the "distinctly neoliberal and postfeminist" (Gill and Scharff, 2011: 1) context has impacted the lives of girls and their engagement with femininity in a range of ways (Gill and Scharff, 2011; McRobbie, 2009; Harris, 2004b). The emphasis that neoliberal and

postfeminist rhetoric such as 'Girl Power' place on self-making and individualism have "enabled the current generation of young women to see themselves, and to be seen, as enjoying new freedoms and opportunities" (Harris, 2004b: 8). Girls have therefore been understood as being able to embody 'flexible' subjectivities (Harris, 2004b: 9). However, while discourses of postfeminism have impacted the theoretical landscape with regards to how femininities and girlhood have been conceptualised, there are still few empirical studies that explore how femininities are negotiated within this context. If it is the case the postfeminist femininities are more fluid than they used to be it will be interesting to see if and how masculinities are experienced differently. Understanding the theoretical conceptualisations of youth masculinities are therefore crucial to developing the understanding of discursive (re)production of gender within contemporary youth taste cultures.

1.2.2 Conceptualising Boyhood: The intersection of youth and masculinity

Compared to women's studies, men's studies and studies of masculinity are still in their early days, coming to prominence in the UK in the 1990s alongside the rise of the 'new man' (Osgerby, 2004: 183). Similarly to the definitions made of femininity above, masculinity can be understood as "what men ought to be" (Connell, 2005: 70), but this normative approach tells us little of the negotiation and the (re)production of these discourses. One of the central focuses of contemporary masculinity studies has therefore been to explore these negotiations. What makes this thesis of significance in relation to the wider academic field is that masculinity studies, and particularly *young* masculinity studies, are at a decisive moment in its history, with the central theory of hegemonic masculinity being placed under ever increasing scrutiny.

Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity uses Gramsci's concept of hegemony as a means of understanding how a particular form of masculinity is able to guarantee the dominant position of (particular types of) men (Connell, 2005: 77). Because of its use of hegemony, the concept is appealing to many academics researching in this field. What makes the theory of hegemonic masculinity theory so attractive is the way in which it illuminates the breadth of masculinities available to individuals, while acknowledging that not all of these masculinities are equal. Although Connell's understanding of masculinity is one that understands "gender as a *structure* of social practice" (2005: 72, emphasis added), I believe her concept of hegemonic masculinity can nevertheless be usefully applied to a poststructuralist approach. This is because hegemonic masculinity theory de-essentialises masculine behaviour, seeing it as a construction rather than as an immutable 'fact'. This also helps us to make sense of how 'traditionally masculine' stereotypes are discursively (re)produced by young people. Lusher and Robins contribute to this understanding, suggesting that hegemonic masculinity provides a prototype for "enabling people to act certain ways" (2009: 369), helping us to understand how these discourses (re)produce gender.

What makes masculinities *hegemonic* rather simply *multiple* is the hierarchy that is (re)produced. Masculinity and hierarchy can be usefully understood through the concept of hegemony, "hegemony in the gender order is the use of culture for such disciplinary purposes: setting standards, claiming popular assent and discrediting those who fall short" (Connell, 2005: 214). Through the application of hegemony we can start to see how some versions of masculinity are privileged within contemporary culture. However, not solely focusing on masculinity in this conceptualisation, Connell also defines masculinity in a way that helps us to understand the relationship it has to femininity in terms of domination:

“Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.” (Connell, 2005: 77)

The concept of hegemonic masculinity therefore helps us to understand the motivations behind (re)producing masculinity in ‘traditional’ ways, as to not conform or to reject the currently accepted ‘ideal’ is to be almost certainly in a position of subordination within the wider gender ‘order’. That said, Connell also argues that “this is not to say that the most visible bearers of hegemonic masculinity are always the most powerful people” (2005: 77), forcing us to undertake a close reading of how masculinity is understood and (re)produced in each context. Theories of hegemonic masculinity are therefore useful to this thesis insofar as they allow us to make sense of the pervasiveness of traditionally masculine stereotypes that are discursively (re)produced in terms of “the *current ideal*” (Cheng, 1999: 297, emphasis in original).

Theories of hegemonic masculinity can therefore help us to understand some of the ways in which discourses of boys’ physicality has led to what I consider to be a problematic over-emphasis on the deviant nature of youth masculinities. Nayak and Kehily refer to boys as ‘in crisis’, as a result of shifting gender norms in late-modernity (2008: 42). Barker (2005) connects the crisis of masculinity directly to the lives of young men, arguing that the ways in which boys and men are socialised have led to high death rates for them as a social group. Barker asserts that across the world “young men [15-24] die earlier than young women and die more often than older men largely because they are trying to live up to certain models of manhood – they are dying to prove that they are ‘real men’” (2005: 2). Barker’s argument very starkly demonstrates the need for us to interrogate the discourses

of masculinity that young people (re)produce within empirical study. Despite the arbitrariness of masculinity, Barker's comments reveal the very real lived consequences experienced by boys across the world.

More broadly, sociologists such as Andersson (2008) have stressed that young males are considered a deviant group within society, highlighting the continued need for us to examine the relationship between boys and discourses of violence (seen to be privileged within a hegemonic understanding of masculinity). Robb has noted that these discourses of violence and masculinity, which are regularly (re)produced and (re)presented within contemporary culture, have had an impact on the realities of boys, noting that "boys and men were only too aware of the negative ways in which boys and men are represented in the mass media and elsewhere" (2007: 120). Other academic studies that can further our understanding of hegemonic masculinity within the lives of boys can be understood through compulsory heterosexuality. For example, Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman have noted the ways in which masculinity within boy culture continues to be rigidly constrained within homophobic rhetoric and the assertion of "'normal' masculinity through heterosexuality" (2002: 175). Within this enactment of masculinity, which is heavily (hetero)sexually regulated, they find that "popular masculinity involves 'hardness', sporting prowess, 'coolness', casual treatment of schoolwork and being adept at 'cussing'" (Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman, 2002: 10). The masculine 'qualities' that are (re)produced in these discourses can also be seen in the 'parodic masculinity' shown in Woodward's (2004) study of boxing, exemplifying the ways in which it is the traditional (physical) forms of masculinity that hold status within a hegemonic regime. These discourses of 'traditional' masculinity can also be observed in audience studies, which reveal that boys "actively perform media usage as a means of affirming, and in some cases, policing masculinity" (Ging, 2005: 43). In this affirmation and/or policing of masculinity, Ging (2005) found that boys would align themselves with texts that signified acceptable codes of masculinity while also distancing

themselves from texts considered to be feminine. This study is useful because it helps us to see that discourses of masculinity play an important role within cultural consumption, and indicate that gendered discourses may be employed within the articulation of taste. This is because in Ging's (2005) study when boys talked about their media consumption it became an opportunity (re)produce traditional versions of masculinity and police those masculinities that were not discursively legitimate. Within Ging's (2005) observations, a (hegemonic) hierarchy of masculinity that rendered some forms of cultural preference acceptable and others inappropriate was key, further highlighting the heuristic applicability of Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity. Ging believed that the motivation to conform was located within the fear of homosexualisation, with homophobic remarks being used as a means of policing boys at different levels (2005: 46).

The role of homophobia in contemporary boys' taste cultures is particularly noteworthy as we can see that boys tend to follow the traditional masculine archetype in a hegemonic system, while I have discussed above that in general girls tend to be a little more fluid in their negotiation of femininity. As Ging's study indicates, it may be that sexuality is an important factor in how gender is experienced and (re)produced for those who present as boys, and those who present as girls. Sexuality has been particularly useful in the academic investigation of masculinity as a wide range of studies have found that homosexuality is routinely rejected in boys' cultures (Rasmussen, 2004; Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman, 2002; Epstein and Johnson, 1998; Kehily and Nayak, 1997; Nayak and Kehily, 1996;). When we compare this to studies of girls, a few studies have found that girls enact lesbian displays as a form of resistance (Nayak and Kehily, 2008; Blackman, 1998), this experience for boys and girls can be considered markedly different. Homophobia has thus been discussed as playing a central role in the discursive regulation and (re)production of youth masculinities within a hegemonic framework. Although these theories have been complicated by more recent studies as I will now discuss, its prevalence within academic

investigation, especially youth masculinity studies, requires us to continue to take it seriously within this research.

Therefore, while pervasive, the theory of hegemonic masculinity has come under considerable criticism from proponents of inclusive masculinity, who posit that rather than hierarchical and ostracising, masculinity in recent years has become instead increasingly inclusive. I believe that instead of treating these two academic fields as incompatible, I want to use inclusive masculinity theory as a way of *critiquing* and *complicating* hegemonic masculinity theory model, rather than rejecting it altogether. To better understand these complexities I turn here to the theories of inclusive masculinity, outlining my approach to this new academic field.

Some of the main criticisms of Connell's hegemonic masculinity theory focus on the way in which it is too simplistic, arguing that it doesn't account for the contradictory ways in which individuals engage with masculinity (Wetherell and Edley, 1999). I would also like to add to this that it doesn't account for the contradictory ways in which females and non-binary individuals engage with these masculinities either. A number of academics have also suggested that researchers have become over reliant on Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity, overlooking the complexities of masculinity while in the search for hegemony (McCormack, 2012; Anderson, 2009; Pringle, 2005). It is therefore the intention of this thesis to critically reflect on these concerns throughout, considering hegemonic masculinity as a potentially heuristic theory while also considering the alternative approaches offered by inclusive masculinity theory.

To follow McCormack (2012) and answer the question of 'does hegemonic masculinity theory work?' with 'sometimes' might make it appear that I am sitting on the fence. But this is not the case at all, rather I believe that to say 'sometimes' is to acknowledge the complexities of masculinity within the context of contemporary youth

culture(s). Indeed, *especially* within contemporary youth cultures. As I have argued above, this is because although the period of youth is one that has been understood as having the potential to be subversive and a site of cultural innovation, consideration of homophobia suggests that this might not always be the case. Youth therefore provides a particularly interesting site of investigation into gender and culture.

Within Anderson's inclusive masculinity theory an understanding is developed where masculinity is not maintained within a hierarchical (and thus oppressive) hegemony. Instead, inclusive masculinity theory argues that "many archetypes of masculinity can be socially esteemed" (McCormack, 2012: 45). Rather than understanding masculinity as being dominated by a 'traditional' form of masculinity which is what is assumed to be valued within theories of hegemonic masculinity, theories of inclusive masculinity argue this is not always the case. Instead, McCormack argues that "there will be a marked expansion in the range of permissible behaviors for boys and men" (2012: 45). Without fear of being homosexualised boys can "act in ways once considered transgressive without the threat of homophobic policing" (McCormack, 2012: 45). This is because it is argued that cultural homophobia is less regulative within the contemporary context. It is therefore in rethinking the relationship between gender and sexuality that this theory progresses our understanding of masculinity. The most significant challenge to hegemonic masculinity theory offered by inclusive masculinity is therefore in the questioning of the heterosexuality that is assumed to be privileged within a hegemonic masculine hierarchy. Anderson believes that hegemonic forms of masculinity, where the traditional or 'orthodox' (to use Anderson's term) masculinity is rewarded, *only* occurs pervasively in contexts of homophobia (2009: 8). Homophobia is a concept developed by Anderson, and is defined as "the cultural fear of being homosexualized" (McCormack, 2012: 44). In periods of homophobia Anderson argues that men need to "publically align their social identities with heterosexuality in order to avoid homosexual suspicion" (2009: 8). Therefore, within

inclusive masculinity it is argued that “there is an awareness that heterosexual men can act in ways once associated with homosexuality, with less threat to their public identity as heterosexual” (McCormack, 2012: 7). This means that in times of diminished homophobia homophobia is unable to regulate masculinity in ways that Connell’s theory of hegemonic masculinity would allow. This is important as it suggests that if we were to find ourselves permanently in a period of diminished homophobia then it could be that the discursive (re)production of gender as a binary would have limited days. Theorists such as Anderson and McCormack are keen to assert that we do not live in a gender utopia (Anderson, 2009: 14), but nevertheless argue that we have started to see that “boys ascribing to different masculine archetypes can maintain high school status” (McCormack, 2012: xxviii). McCormack develops this understanding after having undertaken an ethnography of sixth form students in England where he conceptualised a model of ‘homosexually themed discourse’ (2012: 118). Here, McCormack emphasises that in some instances phrases such as ‘that’s so gay’ are not necessarily homophobic, and thus cultural context is crucial to how we understand it as scholars (2012: 118). If this is the case, this will have wide reaching effects on how we understand contemporary masculine youth cultures, especially in terms of hegemonic masculinity. I follow McCormack’s thesis that context is indeed key, but the wealth of work that I discussed above that suggests that homophobia continues to impact young people’s experiences of gender (especially boys) means that I believe that we should proceed with caution in this area. Therefore within this thesis I pay careful attention to the multiple forms of regulation in the discursive (re)production of gender.

McCormack argues the case for inclusive masculinity persuasively with reference to rich empirical data, however there is an important distinction between McCormack’s study of young people and the study I present here. This is because McCormack researched young people in their *late*-teens, those at school but no longer required by law to attend. Looking at younger teens allows us to consider how masculinity is made sense of and

experienced during a time when young people are “becoming more aware of their gender roles and what is socially appropriate for a male or a female” (Dumais, 2002: 59). As I argue in the analysis chapters, this is important because compulsory education provides a ‘hyper-regulatory’ space for young people, and thus there is an important generational/contextual distinction between the subjects of McCormack’s investigation and mine.

Academic investigations into youth and gender therefore reveal the complexities of gender (re)production within youth. By looking at masculinities and femininities separately I have been able to show the highly differentiated ways in which they have been understood within academic investigation. Within this study I consider girls and boys, masculinity and femininity together, to reveal the usefulness of exploring gender holistically.

1.3 Researching Gender and Youth: The Way Forward

In this chapter I have argued for a poststructuralist account of identity, and through this destabilised deterministic accounts of youth and gender. I have emphasised the importance of discourse, arguing that through an interrogation of discourse we can come to expose the processes through which gender is (re)produced. I therefore follow theorists such as Foucault and Butler who argue that individuals are ‘tissues of textualities’ and thus identity is a signifying practice. In terms of gender more specifically, I have offered a queer account arguing that gender only comes into being the moment in which it is communicated. If gender is made, then understanding *how* gender is made is significant. This is because I have argued that gender is not an innocent category, but one that has very ‘real’ consequences for all that live with it, and especially for females and queer people.

I have complemented these philosophical positions through reference to the work of Goffman, using his dramaturgical accounts to highlight the important role played by the

audience in the discursive (re)production of gender. This is because this thesis is concerned with how audiences (re)produce discourses of gender when reading the articulations of their peers. The period of youth is therefore an important context for developing this understanding. In the first instance youth is considered to offer us a glimpse of the new adulthood, and thus through examination of youth we can start to imagine what gender might look like in the future (Nayak and Kehily, 2006; White and Wyn, 2004). Further to this there are conflicting accounts of how regulatory the period of youth is, with some approaches indicating that it is a period of discursive transgression and creativity (Hesmondhalgh, 2005; McRobbie, 1994), but when considered specifically in relation to gender has been understood as somewhat regulatory, especially in terms of boyhood and masculinity (Rasmussen, 2004; Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman, 2002; Epstein and Johnson, 1998). The differences between the findings of young femininities and young masculinities highlight the need for us to continue to explore the discursive differences between these categories, not least because they have a very 'real' impact on the experiences of young people. I have therefore shown that the intersection of youth and gender provides a fascinating focus through which to undertake academic interrogation.

In this chapter I have also alluded to some of the gendered values that are held within discourse, and these are ideas that I explicate in the following chapter. This is because my interest is in the exploration of taste cultures as a space where we can see the discursive (re)production of gender. I argue that through taste cultures we can find a relatively overlooked field of academic interrogation when it comes to the (re)production of gender. While overlooked, I believe that taste culture theory offers great potential in providing tools through which to interrogate and deconstruct these discourses. This is because theories of taste are overwhelmingly concerned with the (re)production of social identities, and as with identities such as youth and gender, taste *appears* natural, but I argue that it is not and it is instead (re)produced through discourse. Taste can therefore be

a particularly enlightening lens through which to understand these complex social categories because 'taste guides choice' and while "appearing natural, such choices are linked to the organisation of the social world (Silva and Wright, 2005: 5). I therefore believe that it is *crucial* that we take seriously the discursive role that taste cultures play in the (re)production of gender. My argument is that the cultural parameters of 'appropriate' taste require individuals to have an understanding of what is appropriate on the grounds of gender. As I stated above, despite being complementary, these academic fields have rarely been brought together within academic inquiry. As a means of being able to bring together these fields in this thesis I turn in the following chapter to the discussion of taste, with the aim of demonstrating its conceptual usefulness in understanding the (re)production of gender within contemporary youth culture(s).

Chapter Two

Conceptualising Taste

“[S]tudy of the politics of taste is essential to our understanding of the of the subtle forces at work in power relationships and the reproduction of the social structure”

(Bryson, 1996: 897)

Although this quote from Bryson discusses social *structures*, an issue to which I return later in this chapter, it nevertheless raises important questions about the role that taste plays when it comes to power and social reproduction. Taste, from this perspective, *matters*, and in this chapter I make the case for *why* it matters and how we can use it to better understand the discursive (re)production of gender within contemporary youth taste cultures.

One of the central motivations behind this thesis is the development of conceptual tools through which we can undertake interrogations into the (re)production of gender. It develops our understanding of gender (re)production in its focus on taste cultures, arguing that we should take seriously the role of taste in the discursive (re)production of gender. This is not only because the intersection of gender and taste is a vastly underexplored field, but also because I believe that taste cultures can tell us much about cultural reproduction more broadly. This makes it a rich site for academic investigation. I am therefore interested in power at the everyday level, and uncovering some of the ways in which these everyday instances of power come to play a much bigger role within culture in terms of gender and patriarchy. When people talk about the things that they like or dislike, I believe that gender is (re)produced. Notions of what gender is and what gender means therefore play a role in the tastes that people express. I therefore understand the relationship between taste and gender to be iterative, with gender informing taste and taste (re)producing gender. I argue

that the audiences of these expressions also (re)produce gender as a means of understanding these tastes as either 'appropriate' or 'inappropriate' (there may of course be instances where audiences are indifferent or the text(s) articulated are outside of their field of reference). As I have argued previously, knowledge of the parameters of 'acceptable' taste means that individuals are required to have an understanding of what is or is not gender appropriate. In this chapter I discuss the motivations that have led me to make this claim, examining the different approaches in taste theory and highlighting the useful conceptual tools that have been developed thus far, explaining the extent to which I have adopted them in this thesis.

I understand taste as concerned with "cultural choices and preferences" (Kundu, 2011: 15), adding *rejections* to this definition too. I place rejections alongside preferences because I argue that what one articulates a dislike for is as important as what one articulates a preference for (an area to which I return below). I am interested in when taste is made social, when individuals engage in conversations about the things that they like and dislike. I understand taste as articulated and 'made real' in the moment of expression, especially as it implies that an individual thinks and makes choices about what they say. This connects back to the discussions in the previous chapter of identity performance and discursive (re)production. Taste then becomes "a means of framing 'identity' by marking one's identification with a particular group and one's difference from other groups" (Malson, Marshall and Woollett, 2002: 476). Articulating taste is therefore "a means of signifying particular subjectivities" (Malson, Marshall and Woollett, 2002: 476). I therefore conceive of taste as an articulation (an expression that is communicated) but also something that can also be used as a signifier (used in the performance of identity). In thinking about the role that taste plays in how identity is both presented and read by others, the significance of making it the site of academic interrogation, particularly when it comes to questions about the (re)production of gender, is demonstrated.

Following in the footsteps of Bourdieu's seminal work *Distinction* (1984), much of the existing literature that explores taste cultures examines class (Bennett et al., 2009; Skeggs, 1997), and given the persistence of inequalities at the level of social class these remain important questions to ask. However, of no less importance are questions of gender, which have been far less frequently asked in relation to taste (with Skeggs' *Formations of Class and Gender* (1997) providing an important exception). With regard to *youth* taste cultures, much of the preceding literature has either been concerned with subcultural consumption (Driver, 2008; Blackman, 1998; Thornton, 1995), or the young people's consumption of popular culture (Duits and Romondt Vis, 2009; Ging, 2005; Baker, 2004a; Baker, 2004b) rather than *taste* per se. Of the relatively fewer studies that examine taste broadly in youth cultures concern is often with the 'cool' (Pedrozo, 2011; Miles, Cliff and Burr, 1998). As I explore in both this chapter and the empirical sections of this thesis, 'cool' is not a necessarily useful concept for thinking about gender, as one need not be cool in order to perform an 'appropriate' gender identity. This thesis is therefore the first to my knowledge that interrogates the role that taste cultures play in the (re)production of gender in contemporary youth culture(s).

2.1 Taste and Cultural Reproduction

Issues of taste and cultural reproduction, especially in terms of inequality, have been asked within cultural studies for many years now and this thesis develops this field of investigation. Veblen's (2007) theories of conspicuous consumption developed in the turn of the last century demonstrates the long history of academic interrogation into taste cultures. However, it is only in the wake of Bourdieu's conceptual development of the academic field that my motivations for examining youth taste cultures can be best understood. Bourdieu has had a profound influence in how academics have thought about taste, forcing us to think about the ways in which "taste classifies, and it classifies the

classifier” (Bourdieu, 2010: xxix), issues central to this thesis. Bourdieu’s (2010) conceptualisation of habitus, capital and field have revolutionised the ways in which many academics have understood and researched class reproduction in contemporary culture. I argue, however, that his structuralist approach is one that has limited applicability to this thesis, offering some broad metaphorical tools that help us in our examination of gender and taste cultures, but many that may not. In this section I outline what of Bourdieu’s concepts I find useful and why, focusing in particular the usefulness of the idea of capital in thinking about how and why some tastes and texts are valued in terms of gender and why some are not. As part of this discussion I offer explanations of why I do not adopt the concepts of habitus, field and capital more specifically, identifying tensions in their structural formation in relation to my poststructural approach.

2.1.1 Bourdieu’s Contributions

The central contribution offered in Bourdieu’s (2010) conceptualisation of distinction is in highlighting the role that cultural wealth rather than financial wealth has in the reproduction of class. Bourdieu is therefore not simply concerned with taste, but also “the way in which those tastes arise out of, and are mobilised in, struggles for social recognition or status” (Jenkins, 2002: 129). In terms of taste cultures more specifically, Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of different forms of capital is the most useful in achieving this understanding because I argue that it is in the *distribution* of these capitals that we are able to identify the “micropolitics of power” (Skeggs, 1997: 8). Therefore if *economic* capital is the wealth, or the money, one has, and social capital is who you know and the connections you hold to other people, *cultural* capital, the third capital that comes to form symbolic capital can be less easy to pin down. This is because when discussing class, Bourdieu (2010) theorises cultural capital in terms of ‘legitimate taste’. For Bourdieu legitimate taste is connected to works of high culture, moving down to ‘popular taste’, which is exemplified

by texts “devalued by popularization” (2010: 8). However, I do not believe that this approach is applicable to the contemporary context, and especially in British youth cultures. As Prieur and Savage have argued “it is difficult to transfer the high value given to classic highbrow culture in France in the 1960s to other European countries today” (2011: 567). Thus, in response to this, recent projects that have used concepts of cultural capital have done so by reworking how they understand cultural capital in relation to their research subjects (Bennett et al., 2009; Skeggs, 1997; Thornton, 1995) and broadly speaking this thesis does the same. In these contexts, cultural capital gives individuals a means of distinguishing themselves from one another in terms of their cultural tastes. This shows how particular groups can define their taste cultures as superior to other groups (Bennett et al., 2009), and thus legitimacy can be enjoyed (Prieur and Savage, 2011: 577). These ideas of legitimacy and superior tastes are strengths offered by this theory when it comes to class, but are complicated when applied to gender. This is because when striving to achieve legitimacy in relation to the dominant discourses of gender, the investments in cultural texts that are understood as either ‘appropriate’ or ‘inappropriate’ do not necessarily confer privilege in terms of value or advantage. This is to say that if “cultural capital works rather like property [whereby] those with it gain at the expense from those without” (Bennett et al., 2009: 11), it is hard to imagine how one could ‘gain’ by being *more* feminine, or *more* masculine. This is especially because femininity usually occupies a lower cultural position to masculinity, and masculinity has been understood as being increasingly inclusive (as shown in the previous chapter). Thus, if metaphors of capital are to help us understand symbolic wealth in society (Huppertz, 2009: 45) we can see that masculinity remains ‘wealthy’ under patriarchy. However, when we think of femininity in these terms it is more complex. This is because femininity is an “amalgam of practice and appearance, it can be simultaneously negative and positive” (Skeggs, 2004a: 27), and thus the potential values of femininity are incredibly complex. This is not to say that the values of masculinity are not

complex, but rather that under patriarchy we can recognise that the value of femininity is negotiated in different ways. Therefore, the discursive (re)production of gender can be understood as nuanced and complex when it comes to taste cultures, and the gendered value of texts is much more subtle than was perhaps found in relation to class. This focus on gender reminds us of a wider absence of gender within Bourdieu's original concept of cultural capital.⁶

Nevertheless I believe that Bourdieu's theories can tell us much about the discursive (re)production of contemporary identities and gender is no exception. In the final stages of this chapter I offer my own conceptualisation of gender and *value* (rather than capital more specifically), thinking about the potential for masculine value and feminine value. Therefore I am keen to embrace Bourdieu's broader contributions to our understanding of taste cultures, but am cautious when applying it to our understanding of discursive gender (re)production. This is because although "feminists seeking new approaches to the social dynamics of gender relations have looked [...] to the more general aspects of Bourdieu's work for inspiration" (Bennett, 2010: xxii), when focusing on the *specifics* of Bourdieu's concepts we find they have an uneasy fit when removed from class (as much as they can be) and applied to gender. This is especially the case with the poststructural account of gender given in this thesis.

Bourdieu's structuralist account has also been raised as an issue by Laberge, who argues that Bourdieu's emphasis on structural positions and dispositions, as well as the unconscious aspects of the habitus have led to many feminist problems with his work (1995: 132). In the first instance, Bourdieu's habitus is "terribly well organised" (Skeggs, 2004a: 27), and thus I argue we are unable to contain or account for queer identities within this

⁶ Bourdieu (2010) considered gender to be a secondary category and this has therefore been noted as being a significant 'blind spot' within his thesis of *Distinction* (for further exploration see Bennett et al., 2009: 214-233; Huppertz, 2009; Skeggs, 2004a; Dumais, 2002; McNay, 1999; Laberge, 1995)

account. Further to this, we can see the conflict between Bourdieu's habitus and my poststructural feminist position in the language that he uses to describe it:

“The habitus is not only a structuring structure, which organises practices and the perception of practices, but also a structured structure: the principle of division into logical classes which organizes the perception of the social world”

(Bourdieu, 2010: 166)

The idea of the habitus as a 'structuring structure' is thus inherently problematic for this thesis. Furthermore, Bourdieu develops his idea stating that “[t]he habitus is necessarily internalized and converted into a disposition that generates meaningful practices and meaning-giving perceptions” (2010: 166). This is an attractive theory as it emphasises meaning in terms of both the individual and the audience. However, I contend that the *dispositional* nature of identity proposed by Bourdieu's habitus cannot be consolidated with my discursive approach to gender. As I argued in the previous chapter, I understand identity as iterative rather than dispositional. Within this I emphasise the discursive (re)production of identity and reject notions of the 'internal' dispositional one. The concept of 'habitus' is therefore not simply problematic when applied to gender, but rather it is at odds with my philosophical approach to identity more broadly. Rejecting the concept of habitus can therefore help to explain why I have chosen not to adopt the concept of the field, and instead use the term 'context'⁷ within this thesis.

As with habitus, the concept of field is incredibly structural, Hillier and Rooksby have argued that the field “has both structured the habitus specific to it, and in turn, been structured by it” (2005: 316). The field, the setting in which individuals are hierarchically located, “has structured positions, whose occupants typically have different resources and

⁷ My understanding of the word 'context' and its application in this thesis is elucidated below.

dispositions” (Warde, 2004: 12). A field then is structured around a set of positions, positions that are pre-determined and located within a wider structure. What is particularly problematic for this thesis is the ‘logic of dichotomies’ such as high/low culture, masculine/feminine, “that underpin the different social fields” (Skeggs, 2004a: 22). However, I argue that these positions are *not* pre-determined and are *not* binary, and instead this power and these positions are discursively (re)produced. Further to this, a powerful position in the field is dependent upon the habitus, which, in its dispositional nature, I have discussed as being problematic when applied to gender. Thus the incompatibility of Bourdieu’s structural account and my poststructural position are again at odds. It has therefore been convincingly argued that gender never appears in a pure field of its own (Skeggs, 2004a; Kraus, 1993; Moi, 1991). This is because it is difficult to isolate a field where gender is of particular relevance (Kraus, 1993), and thus if we want to conceive of gender as part of a field, it would need to be considered as part of “the general social field, rather than any specific field of gender” (Moi, 1993: 1034). The final problem with the concept of field emerges when applied to the questions asked by this thesis regarding gender and cultural (re)production. For example, issues are raised when we consider the hierarchical structure of the field, the pursuit to be a powerful possessor of capital, with the concept of gender. This is because the field implies a competitive component, particularly in its analogy to games where individuals struggle for a position (Warde, 2004: 15). It is therefore difficult to conceive of gender in these explicitly competitive terms. As I have argued above it is hard to imagine how one could gain from being *more* masculine or *more* feminine than others. It is for this reason that I believe we need to work carefully with the concept of capital and value, in order to see both the strengths and weakness of conceptualising the discursive (re)production of gender within contemporary youth taste cultures using Bourdieu’s economic metaphors. The reworking of capital in terms of value are offered later in this thesis, where I adapt Bourdieu’s economic metaphors in a

way that helps us to better understand gendered value, and more specifically the worth or importance of a particular preference in terms of the gender that one is attributed.

Eschewing the concept of field, thinking about spaces and moments of articulation in terms of context is therefore useful. Context can be understood as the space where expressions of tastes become 'real'; it is the space and circumstances in which the articulation is made. Each context is where the discourses that inform what is 'appropriate' are (re)produced and/or transgressed. Therefore within these contexts we see the ways in which cultural texts and positions in relation to these texts are gendered and rendered as gender appropriate or inappropriate. There is a wider context, which I have argued is patriarchal (and cisnormative), but there are also micro-contexts where more transgressive discourses may be more common. In the majority of contexts I argue that the dominant discourses regulate. I nevertheless posit that when examining the (re)production of gender within taste cultures, context is key, and we must consider not only *who* is articulating a judgement, but also who *reads* the performance and where/how. This allows us to achieve an understanding of "which kinds of cultural practices are recognised as valuable, by whom, and also the consequences of this for those who do not take part in such practices and who are thereby led to devalue their own cultural forms" (Prieur and Savage, 2011: 570). By exploring the direct experiences of young people this thesis provides a much needed examination of these issues, showing that texts are inscribed with gendered value and gender inappropriate tastes have 'real' consequences for those that articulate them.

Given that gender as a separate concept of analysis is so problematised through Bourdieu's understanding of distinction, we need to bring together different perspectives to think about how gender is (re)produced in taste cultures. And thus, given that gendered distinctions lead to persistent inequalities at the level of gender (especially for women,

trans and queer people⁸), asking questions and developing an understanding of *how* these distinctions are normalised in everyday practice are vital. What is required then is an understanding of the much broader theses posed within the theories of taste culture.

2.1.2 Theories of Contemporary Taste Cultures

Thinking outside of Bourdieu's somewhat (structurally) restrictive framework, in recent years a more flexible understanding of contemporary taste cultures has emerged. For example, the Bennett et al. study of class and exclusion used Bourdieu's concepts in a "looser, more pliable and contingent set of relations to one another than the ones they occupy in *Distinction*" (2009: 36). Other studies in this broader area have focused on the concept of omnivorousness, thinking about the breadth of tastes. Within this section I outline the contributions from these fields as a means of exemplifying how this thesis contributes to the development of taste culture theory more broadly.

Gans conceives of tastes as cultural forms that express values (1974: 10), and in this thesis I narrow this definition to one that focuses on the collective cultures of judgement that pertain to cultural texts. In this definition I think about how judgement is collectively made, and thus I understand taste to be an entirely social entity, something that only has meaning when it is expressed and comprehended. Because taste is worked out collectively, a shared sense of what taste positions are appropriate and why is developed. This can help us to understand how gender is both understood and reproduced in relation to these discourses. I am therefore interested in how value orientations are worked out in relation to dominant tastes. I do not think of taste in terms of 'good taste' or 'bad taste', as this is contingent on each cultural context and is never objective. I instead ask 'what is acceptable?', 'what is appropriate?' and 'what discourses produce this

⁸ This is before we take into account the impact of intersectional identities.

understanding?'. This is because by thinking about articulations of judgement in terms of acceptability we are able to think of taste not as innate, but rather culturally negotiated. In doing so a number of questions are raised such as, 'what judgements are articulated and why?' and 'what might be the consequences of inappropriate taste?'. These are questions that I connect to theories of identity performance, and are explicated in the empirical chapters that follow.

Bryson has provided an invaluable contribution to the academic field by urging us to think not only of cultural *preferences* in terms of taste cultures, but also *negative* cultural evaluations (1996: 884). In doing so Bryson reminds us of the importance of relationality within taste cultures. It is not simply enough to ask what is liked, but that we should also ask what is not liked and why. I have argued that taste is a basis for social exclusion, and thus to look at what is not liked is as important as what is liked. It is my belief that by only exploring what is liked, only part of the story of taste cultures is told. Bryson's (1996) work begins to explicate social exclusion through taste, arguing that taste can tell us much about the subtle forces of power at work, exemplified in the quote that this chapter opened with. Discussion of cultural texts can therefore provide sites where some individuals and groups are 'Othered'. This is a perspective that is central to the work undertaken in this thesis, whereby taste cultures are understood as a central site in the (re)production of gender. However, to assume or suggest that taste cultures are a neat and organised set of responses to cultural texts would be to overlook the complexities of contemporary culture. For example, Karvonen et al. have argued that "established sets of values are becoming more fragmented, suggesting it is increasingly popular to have dissonant, even conflicting values" (2012: 34). This demonstrates the shift in taste cultures from the context in which Bourdieu was writing, complicating our understandings of how taste cultures operate, and requiring us to undertake further academic investigation.

Discussions of omnivorousness have dominated the field since Peterson's first discussion of the concept in 1992, and can help us to understand how significantly cultural consumption and preference has changed since Bourdieu's work in *Distinction*. Peterson posits the view that the 'omnivore' and the 'univore' are "more in line with the contemporary status hierarchy" (1992: 244). This is because individuals (usually middle class) are consuming and enjoying a much broader selection of cultural texts and genres (displaying omnivorous taste) than the 'univores' of the past. Thinking about taste cultures in terms of rejection, Warde, Wright and Gayo-Cal have noted that omnivores also tended to reject fewer items in addition to preferring more (2008: 159). However, such an understanding of taste cultures implies a chaotic form of consumption where 'everything goes', and where there are no limits to its range (Bennett et al., 2009: 254). To respond to this I draw upon Warde, Wright and Gayo-Cal's understanding of the omnivorous position, arguing that rather than being a free for all, "in Britain an omnivorous orientation is itself a way of negotiating and demonstrating a form of distinction" (2008: 164). This is because to be seen as accepting is to demonstrate forms of tolerance that are rewarded in the middle classes (Warde, Wright and Gayo-Cal, 2008). Therefore Bryson (1996: 897) and Warde, Wright and Gayo-Cal (2008) have shown that what is consumed is perhaps less important than *how* it is consumed. This emphasises the need for a study such as this one where I focus on negotiation and collective *understandings*, rather than just the *objects* of discussion.⁹

2.2 Youth Taste Cultures

⁹ What is noteworthy is that almost all of the studies referenced in this section are primarily quantitative (with some triangulating with interviews), illustrating the preferred methodological approach in this field. As I discuss in the following chapter, this can be limiting in terms of understanding the nuances of contemporary taste cultures, particularly in terms of developing an understanding of something as subjective as taste.

Young people are seen as having high and “diverse patterns of cultural consumption” (Roberts, 1997: 3), yet despite this there has been very little research that specifically examines youth *taste* cultures. As I explored in the previous chapter, there has been a relatively long history of academic interest in the cultural practices of young people, with a number concerned with subcultures (see for example, Hall and Jefferson, 1975) and some concerned with the popular (Hirsch et al., 1970). Even in these relatively early studies the diversity of tastes within youth cultures were noted (Fox and Wince, 1975), but few studies actually focused on taste. Within contemporary cultural studies I found that the most common location of youth within the study of taste cultures is often in larger scale projects, whereby young people were usually mentioned tangentially in the studies of adults. For example, Bennett et al. (2009) found that the gendering of cultural practices tended to be more pronounced with older participants, with younger men and women engaging in much more similar activities. This suggests that intersections of gender and age may have less impact on the experiences of young people compared to older people. Similarly, Bryson found that “age and gender have important overall effects on musical taste” (1997: 148), but due to her quantitative approach *why* this is, is not elucidated. Therefore, by looking comparatively across age these studies seem to overlook the potential complexities of the gendering experienced by young people, and thus this research offers a much needed understanding of these complexities.

While there has been less said specifically about contemporary youth taste cultures, a considerable amount has been written about youth and cultural consumption. For example, in the previous chapter I showed that subcultural studies had dominated understandings of youth for a long period of time, spanning from the post-war 50s to the present day. Although I am primarily concerned with more mundane experiences of culture and taste, there have nevertheless been useful concepts developed from these subcultural studies that can be used to help understand youth taste cultures. Hebdige’s (1979)

accounts of bricolage and homology have helped us to think about how original meanings can be reworked by young people as a means of troubling dominant discourses. This reminds us that meanings are inscribed into texts rather than existing 'naturally'. This is useful to remember because an important part of this thesis is about deconstructing how and why particular cultural texts (and thus those individuals that are understood to 'traditionally' like or dislike them) are inscribed with gender (re)producing discourses of gender. Meanwhile in more recent subcultural studies Thornton (1995) revealed the processes of distinction taking place within young people's dance cultures. By taking a Bourdieusian approach she highlighted the importance of taste within dance cultures, particularly in terms of marking out the 'us' and 'them' dichotomy by developing the concept of 'subcultural capital'. For Thornton, subcultural capital was primarily centred around ideas of 'being in the know' (1995: 11), which allowed her to make sense of how the tastes of the young people in the dance culture that she observed were able to mark each other out – those that possessed the 'right' knowledge, and those that did not. Thornton's analysis reveals to us the significance of contemporary youth taste cultures, as it is here that we see collective meanings and understandings informing and regulating what is 'acceptable' and what it not. It is notable that Thornton was not able to take Bourdieu's concepts 'as is' as in their original state they were not applicable. However, by adapting them to suit to the contextual specificity of dance cultures she was able to have a far reaching impact on the academic field. Thornton's work is therefore a useful and motivating example for thinking about Bourdieu's theories in our understanding of contemporary youth taste cultures.

Other works that have considered youth and cultural consumption (but not taste specifically) highlight the discerning nature of young people as audiences, who engage creatively with contemporary media (McRobbie, 1994). Baker has argued that through collective consumption girls are able to engage in forms of serious play, where the girls that

she studied used popular music to challenge conceptions of passivity and demonstrate “the hard work involved in managing identity in their everyday lives” (2004a: 210). Further to this, Allen and Mendick have highlighted the important social function that celebrity performs, arguing that “we need to take pleasure and identification seriously as part of people’s identity work *and* attend to its regulatory and disciplinary consequences” (2013: 90, emphasis in original). The idea that something as mundane, and even as trivialised as celebrity or popular music, can have disciplinary functions therefore urges us to take it seriously within academic investigation. This is particularly important as celebrity studies remains overwhelmingly textual (Turner, 2010). I therefore believe that there is a greater need than ever for us to explore and interrogate the role that everyday popular media plays in the experiences of young people, particularly in terms of regulation.

A growing body of academic work has started to provide answers to some of these questions, although none by looking at taste cultures and gender specifically. Duits and Romondt Vis, for example have noted the ways in which “teenage girls are extremely skilful in sensing group norms [and] carefully negotiating opinions” (2009: 47). This is telling because it demonstrates some of the ways in which girls’ friendships *are* regulatory despite much of the literature conceptualising girls’ friendships as accepting spaces where identities can be worked out (Aapola, Gonick and Harris, 2005; Hey, 1997). When it comes to boys, Ging provides a rare¹⁰ view into their lives in relation to cultural consumption, finding that boys “find in mass media a potent source of references for constructing a repertoire of acceptable codes and signifiers of masculinity” (2005: 47). These studies highlight the significance of undertaking a study that directly explores the regulatory

¹⁰ Only recently has work started to place boys into the frame, including Ging (2005); Nayak and Kehily (2008) and emerging work from Allen, Mendick and Harvey’s study into *Celebrity and Youth Aspirations*.

potential of taste and popular culture within young people's friendships and wider peer group(s).

The things that young people consume play an important role in their everyday lives and how they experience and (re)produce their identities. Miles, Cliff and Burr found that material goods have a central role within the lives of young people because it is through these goods that they believe that relationships and identities are established (1998: 94). Further to this, they argue that, "it was the *symbolic* qualities of consumer goods, as opposed to their *intrinsic* qualities, that appeared to provide the cultural capital with which social peer groups could interact" (Miles, Cliff and Burr, 1998: 89, emphasis added). This demonstrates the importance of *collective* meanings rather than individualistic ones within contemporary youth taste cultures, as it is was the goods that held the more widely recognised *symbolic* value that were used in group situations. This allows us to begin to think about the role that discourse plays in regulating particular tastes, especially in a space like high school that I have found to be hyper-regulatory.¹¹

2.3 Appropriateness in Contemporary Youth Taste Cultures

What I want to demonstrate here is the connection that I see between expressions of taste and the (re)production of gender identities. I see a connection because the body of academic literature that has examined taste cultures has indicated that processes of distinction are at play and people distinguish what types of people other individuals are on the basis of their tastes. I posit that because of this, people regulate what they say they like or dislike on the basis of wider discourses of what is 'appropriate'. By regulation I mean 'to become regular' (Butler, 2004: 40), whereby individuals may either censor or select what

¹¹ Hyper-regulation describes the heightened regulation that takes place in school, due to the close proximity of students and the structure of their timetable. What hyper-regulation is and how it operates is the subject of discussion in Chapter Five.

they say or how they act based on their understanding of the discourses of what is appropriate or permissible within a particular context. It is thus through regulatory discourses that gender is (re)produced. Therefore, when thinking about this in relation to gender it is useful to refer to the work of Butler:

“Thus, a restrictive discourse on gender that insists on the binary of man and woman as the exclusive way to understand the gender field performs a *regulatory* operation of power that naturalizes the hegemonic instance and forecloses the thinkability of its disruption” (Butler, 2004: 43)

The audience regulates by (re)producing discourses that either remind individuals (and thus themselves and others) of what is gender appropriate. In doing so they may also actively problematise particular articulations of taste that may be made. In this way, taste is regulated, and my interest is in the ways in which this regulation takes place on the grounds of gender through discourses of appropriateness. I am interested in the expressions of taste that are made and discussed in group settings because collective understandings are central to discursive (re)production. Kundu argues that “[s]ome tastes and judgements related to taste may be more acceptable and legitimate than others: they could be called the dominant tastes” (2011: 15) and I am interested in the gendering of what may be understood as ‘dominant tastes’. As part of this I am interested in how young people negotiate their expressions in relation to these dominant discourses.

These questions could be applied to any social group with any social identity (and I urge these questions to be asked in future research), but my interest in this thesis is with young people and with gender. Above and in the previous chapter I have outlined some of my reasons for focusing on the lives and experiences of young people. However, in thinking

about gender appropriate taste specifically, Wilska (2003) makes a pertinent point in relation to this. Wilska argues that youth is an important period in one's life as it is during youth that one has the opportunity to become an independent consumer, and as a result of this "the pressures for keeping up with the "legitimate" styles have never been as strong as they are now" (2003: 443). Rather than thinking about *taste* specifically, Wilska thinks about the need to be consuming the 'right' things, and I argue that this is ultimately about taste because by actively and openly consuming something you are displaying (even if indirectly) a preference for a particular text. Thus, what you consume, that is not only consume but *openly* consume in a way lets other people know what you like, can play a role in the (re)production of identity. When talking about music, Leung and Kier argue that "[y]oung people often use music to reflect [their individual characteristics]" (2010: 681). By aligning themselves with particular cultural texts young people can 'say' things about who they are, producing a particular version of their identity. From this perspective then, mundane and everyday activities such as expressing a preference for a particular cultural text matters. I argue that we need to think beyond cultural consumption and look specifically at taste as it is through a focus on taste that we can start to understand how these mundane articulations (re)produce identities. I therefore argue that we need to look at taste because taste acts as a form of communication, insofar as it establishes networks, relationships and status (Bryson, 1997). This is not least because we can think about how identities are regulated and (re)produced through forms of taste because "[t]aste or *judgement* are the heavy artillery of symbolic violence" (Moi, 1991: 1026, emphasis in original). I have explored above how peer cultures impact on the lives of young people, and in the previous chapter I have argued why gender is the product of discourse; here, I theorise the central role that taste cultures play in these (re)productions.

2.3.1 Gender Appropriate Taste and the (Re)Production of Gender

I have argued in the previous chapter that identity and identities are unfixed and constituted within discourse rather than fixed within a knowable 'truth'. I drew upon theories offered by Butler and Goffman to make a case for gender as a performance. In this I argued that audiences of gender performance play an important role. This is because through their gaze, articulations can be read as gender 'appropriate' or not. When people talk about the things that they like or dislike, I believe that discourses of gender have been (re)produced, process that have impacted on the ways in which these tastes are expressed and how they are understood by others. I argue that the audiences of these expressions also (re)produce gender as a means of making sense of these tastes as either 'appropriate' or 'inappropriate' in relation to the gender the audience has attributed to the individual. Performances of gender are therefore "not isolated individual performances for the self, but are performed for, and received and regulated by others" (Evans, 2006: 550). Understanding what is or is not acceptable requires deconstructing the discourses of appropriateness. Appropriate articulations of taste are thus important as they allow the individual to present a discursively dominant (cis)gender.

2.3.2 Value and Appropriateness

In this thesis I argue that taste articulation is an important part of the discursive (re)production of gender within contemporary youth cultures. In thinking about taste cultures we can start to think about the discourses that inform whether or not particular expressions of taste are understood as appropriate or not. Connecting this back to the theories of taste cultures discussed above, research has indicated that young people *do* regulate on the basis of taste, and cultural preferences do (re)produce particular identities.

I have already touched upon the usefulness (as well as limitations) of Bourdieu's economic metaphors previously in this chapter, but in this section I elucidate my use of them in more depth. I posit that individuals (re)produce their gender position in the articulation of gender appropriate taste. They do this by articulating preference for texts that have been inscribed with gendered value. Individuals can draw upon the gendered value of the text to ensure that their articulation is gender appropriate, and this is important in a (cishnormative) context where there is coherence between gender attributed and gender articulated. Value is thus useful because it does not fix gender onto the body and thus alignments can be made with any texts by any person/body. I use the concept of value rather than capital because I do conceive of a gender hierarchy that operates with people benefitting from being *more* masculine or *more* feminine. As I argue in later chapters, young people's motivation is to 'fit in' and not be 'shunned' rather than climb the social hierarchy, even if status could be conferred through 'more' gender. Along similar lines, I also found that too much femininity and too much masculinity is also problematic for young people in their taste articulations.

Gendered value is inscribed into cultural texts on the grounds that it either (re)presents a collectively recognised version of masculinity/femininity and/or is seen by participants to offer something of value to those that present as male or female (there were no gender ambiguous participants in the focus group stage of data collection). There are some cultural texts, or responses to particular cultural texts, that are understood as gendered, being valuable to some genders but not others. The idea of value is therefore conceptually useful because it offers us an understanding of how "people take advantage of consumption practices to reproduce, raise or reinforce their social status in a symbolic way" (Pedrozo, 2011: 116). This emphasis on the symbolic is thus particularly useful when thinking about young people who, in their position within full time education, usually have less financial freedom than many adults. So while Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field

could not be consolidated with my poststructural position, the idea of value which is inspired by capital is nevertheless useful. I have made a distinction between value and capital because I see value as being about meaning and usefulness, as when you say you like something with gendered value you are saying that this thing *means* something to you. Capital on the other hand is about accrual, getting more and rising within the hierarchy on the basis of your accrual. I have argued that the gender hierarchy does not operate in quite the way that such a theory might suggest. There is a patriarchal gender hierarchy, and this impacts taste cultures as the empirical chapters show, but I do not see gender operating in a way whereby *more* gender equates to a higher position.

An individual can help to ensure that their gender identity is coherent and acceptable by articulating tastes that are in line with wider gendered expectations of appropriateness. Because cultural texts are inscribed with gendered value, expressing a preference or rejection for such a text says something about one's gender. We continue to live in a society where a (cis)gender binary is privileged. As a result of this individuals have a motivation to produce a gender that is coherent with the gender that they are attributed. Returning to discussions from the previous chapter, the troubling of gender has been argued to be 'rupturing' for cisgender people and thus cisgender people reify gender and sexual differences (Schilt and Westbrook, 2009). This helps us to understand some of the reasons behind gender regulation. I argue that one of the spaces that we see this performance of 'appropriateness' take place is in taste articulations. By aligning with a text that has been inscribed with gendered value, an individual is able to show the audience of the articulation that they follow the dominant gender discourses by adhering to gender appropriate taste. Appropriateness is therefore central to this as it is only through discourses of gender appropriate taste that gender is (re)produced.

In order to better exemplify how I have conceptualised gendered value and understand how it works I apply it to femininity and masculinity. This follows my conceptualisation of gender discussed in the previous chapter, where I understand it as existing on a spectrum. Within this framework, on one end we would have cultural texts that have been inscribed with feminine value, which would be potentially problematic for boys to articulate preferences for, and masculine value on the other end (which I show in the empirical chapters to be taken up with considerable complexity under patriarchy). This explanation is simplistic, and in the findings chapters of this thesis I work through the nuances of these concepts when applied to the lived realities of the young people that I spoke to in this study.

2.3.3 Masculine Value

I argue that masculine value is inscribed into texts that are seen to have particular significance to male audiences. This is based on the discourses that masculinity is connected to the ideas of 'what boys do', relying to a large degree on gender role stereotypes. In this thesis I work through this idea based on what the participants told me, so much of my discussion about what holds masculine value and why is located in Chapter Seven. In this relatively brief section here I therefore want to outline how I think about the masculine value that is inscribed into texts as contributing to the (re)production of gender in contemporary youth taste cultures.

Given the patriarchal context in which we find ourselves it is perhaps not difficult to conceive of masculine value. After all, the masculine is understood to be inherently valuable under patriarchy (Paechter, 2006). However, the very idea that some cultural texts can be understood as valuable on the grounds of masculinity can help us to see why boys might choose to align themselves with the texts that are inscribed with it. As I show in the empirical chapters a number of texts are inscribed with masculine value on the grounds

that they either represent the proponents of hegemonic masculinity, or they allow for the performance of masculinity when they are articulated. When we combine this idea with Ging's (2005) work, which found that boys negotiate how they talk about cultural texts in ways that 'affirm' masculinity, we can see the significance of asking how particular preferences are seen to affirm masculinity based on the masculine value that they are inscribed with. More specifically, for boys to invest in texts inscribed with masculine value, we can see the (re)production of (cisgender) hegemonic masculinity. In the hyper-regulatory context of school which also operates under patriarchy there are clear motivations to articulate preference for texts with masculine value, *especially* if one presents as a boy. I make this latter point because of course girls or non-binary young people *could* make articulations of preference for texts with masculine value, too. In thinking of taste articulation and the gendered value of cultural texts we can start to think about how taste articulations can provide a space for the potential troubling of gender.

I argue that a boy is able to (re)produce his masculine male identity by articulating preference for texts that have masculine value. He has motivation to do so because as I argue in Chapter Five high school is a hyper-regulatory space. Further to this I show in Chapter Six that conflation between gender and (homo)sexuality often occurs with boys who do not conform to gender 'appropriate' expectations. Not being called 'gay' is therefore motivation to articulate gender appropriate taste. In the existing research McCormack has discussed this affirmation of masculinity by investing in activities high in masculinity such as sports (2012: 50), but he does not extend his definition to include taste cultures. This thesis therefore contributes to McCormack's understanding by examining how masculinity is (re)produced and affirmed in youth cultures through the judgements that young people express towards texts that they inscribe with masculine value. As I argue later in this thesis, masculinity can also be (re)produced and affirmed by rejecting texts that

are inscribed as highly feminine. However, in consideration of the feminine, the idea of feminine value in a patriarchal context is much less clear cut in comparison.

2.3.4 Feminine Value

Unlike with masculinity, it is much harder to see how femininity can be recognised as 'valuable' within a patriarchal context. I believe that to make claims about the value of femininity and femaleness would be ill-advised. As I have discussed in the previous chapter femininity is quite different from masculinity in that it is an "umbrella term for all the different ways in which women are defined by others and themselves" (Järviluoma, Moisala and Vilkkö, 2003: 17), whereas masculinity has been conceptualised as a more narrow set of attributes that men are expected to exhibit. The studies that I discussed in the previous chapter indicated that the parameters of what femininity could mean for girls was much less rigidly constrained than they were for masculinity and boys. This suggests that girls have more freedom to align themselves with masculinity in ways that boys would be less likely to be able with femininity (but it is nevertheless possible). These issues all have an impact on how we can conceive of feminine value and the role that it plays within contemporary youth taste cultures. For a text to hold feminine value it must therefore have firstly been inscribed as feminine, and for this to happen it must possess some attributes that are connected to what are widely understood as 'for girls' in some way. I argue that these are arbitrary and (re)produced in discourse, but they nevertheless hold gendered meaning and are iteratively (re)produced. Thus articulating a preference for something that has been inscribed as valuable in terms of femininity is to either affirm or problematise the gender that person presents as. Drawing on texts inscribed with feminine value can allow girls to 'boost' their femininity (as well as problematise a boy's masculinity) but because the 'feminine' operates in a very different way to that of the masculine (in a patriarchal context) this feminine 'value' may not be more widely valuable in the same way that

masculinity is. What is valuable in terms of femininity is far less evenly recognised and does not necessarily hold value across time and space. As I show in Chapter Eight, the feminine is something that many participants, male and female, distance themselves from, indicating its lower cultural value. Thinking about the wider patriarchal context, which devalues femininity (on the whole), can help us to understand why girls have a more complex relationship with femininity, an issue that is given considerable focus in the empirical analysis.

2.4 Concluding Remarks

By considering the broad field of research that explores taste cultures I have demonstrated a considerable gap in knowledge when it comes to youth and gender. I have claimed that if we want to have a better understanding of the discursive (re)production of gender we must examine taste cultures. Gender is a vastly underexplored field within taste culture theory despite it having the potential to tell us much about the complexity of taste cultures. By looking at taste I believe that we can have a much better understanding of how gender is (re)produced, and given the persistence of inequalities that exist at the level of gender, this understanding is crucial.

I have argued that Bourdieu's economic metaphors are useful for understanding the cultural (re)production of identity, but are limited their structuralist approach. Instead I have rejected Bourdieu's habitus preferring instead to think in terms of context. I was interested in his idea of capital, but have reconceptualised it to make sense of gendered *value* (that is inscribed into texts and can be used by young people to articulate gender appropriate taste, rather than 'trade' for an advantageous position in the hierarchy). As part of this I have emphasised the importance of considering gender appropriate articulations of taste during the period of youth. In terms of how I understand an

articulation of taste, I have defined it as any expression of judgement toward a cultural text made before an audience.

Taste culture research is a rich and diverse field, yet despite this youth and gender remain vastly underexplored within it. Given the continued interest in youth consumption I find this to be astonishing. In this research I hope that I inspire many more studies in the future to consider the role that taste plays within the cultural lives of young people, not only looking at gender but at the many other identities that are (re)produced such as race, class, sexuality and ability (to name a few). In the following chapter I outline the methodological approaches that I use, providing tools that other researchers can take forward to better understand contemporary youth taste cultures. Through this I show my innovative approach to studies of youth and taste, developing data collection that places emphasis on the youth experience, devising methods that help to ensure that young people's voices are at the forefront of this research, and the nuances of youth taste cultures are captured.

Chapter Three

Researching Gender and Youth Taste Cultures:

Methodological Procedure

The aim of this thesis is to interrogate the following research questions:

- Are taste cultures experienced differently for young people that that present as male and those that present as female?
- In contemporary youth cultures, is taste rendered (in)appropriate on the grounds of gender? If so, in what way(s)?
- How are masculinity and femininity understood by young people in terms of taste and value when it comes to cultural texts?

The choice of methods that I outline here play an integral role in how we can answer these questions.

The previous chapters have outlined the range of studies that speak to the research questions asked in this thesis. By bringing the fields of youth, gender and taste together, we can see that there is an opportunity to build on the unique research traditions that come with them. For example, while explorations of youth and gender have tended to draw on qualitative work, studies of taste have often been quantitative in nature. It is in bringing together these diverse yet complementary fields that we see one of the unique contributions offered by this thesis, particularly in developing a rich understanding of how gender is (re)produced in taste during youth.

3.1 Methodology

Within contemporary social research we have seen the growth of a set of qualitative methods that can be used when attempting to study the 'life-worlds' of groups and individuals (Gray, 2003: 2). Qualitative research is of particular interest within feminist cultural studies due to the focus it places on meaning, which allows us to work through the complexities of subjectivity. In terms of gender more specifically, qualitative methods are able to interrogate the subtle relations of power that contribute to the reproduction of gender identities (Järviluoma, Moisala and Vilkkö, 2003: 2). The attention that this research places on taste and the discursive (re)production of youth gender identities therefore lends itself to the qualitative tradition. This is not only due to the subjectivities of taste (Malson, Marshall and Woollett, 2002) and youth cultures (McRobbie, 1994), but also due to my conceptualisation of gender as discursive. Wood (2009) has highlighted the potential challenges of translating poststructural accounts of the self to empirical research, but ultimately argued that "it is time that the advances made in post-structuralist thought are made to speak in our methodological approaches" (2009: 111). I therefore follow Wood's claim that "it is not incompatible to test subjectivity as an unfinished process in which gender is constantly in flux as an unstable category, and yet still carry out empirical research" (2009: 111). Within this chapter I show some of the ways in which I have approached empirical research from a poststructuralist perspective, and in the findings and analysis of this thesis I demonstrate the rich understandings that can be developed from taking on the challenges that Wood identifies.

In Thomas' study of teenage femininity she argues that there are a range of spaces that constrain femininity (2008: 65), and that these are further complicated by the 'generational evaluation of norms' that act as a 'vehicle for change over time' (2008: 68). The complexity of these contextually specific cultures and identities therefore require

research methodologies that are able to make sense of the meanings that frame these elements of social life. Further to this, the emphasis on *articulation* of gender identities within these taste cultures also requires acknowledgement of *active* agents that *(re)produce* identity within their 'lived experiences' (see Gray, 2003: 32-35). It has been argued by Gray that "the subject is related to 'discursive formations' through a process of articulation" (2003: 33), which "necessitates attendance to the cultures of everyday life, but with a sophisticated understanding of the nature and status of experience, subjectivity and identity" (Gray, 2003: 33). This means that bespoke qualitative methods such as those discussed below, are much better suited to developing a sophisticated understanding of youth experiences that this thesis endeavours to offer.

This research draws on three qualitative methods, all of which offer different approaches to interrogating the role that taste cultures play in the (re)production and regulation of gender in youth cultures. These methods, ethnography, identity pages and focus groups, have been designed to provide both contextual data, as well as data that is the basis for analysis in the findings chapters of this thesis. This research therefore utilises a mixed method approach to collect data that speaks from a range of sources. For LeBlanc, mixing methods makes her findings more reliable, arguing that "observations or interviews can serve to verify aspects of self-presentation observed by the researcher [...] allowing researchers to access both the objective and subjective aspects of lives" (1999: 20). The combination of methods therefore offers the potential to get further under the surface, and thus develop a nuanced understanding of the complexities of the cultures that we investigate. The mixing of methods in this thesis is used to build on data by using a range of sources and methods, rather than to simply verify, as was traditionally the motivation approaches such as triangulation (Webb et al., 1966). Mixed methods in this case foregrounds a desire to develop innovative approaches to studies of youth and taste cultures, understanding that one method alone would not be able to capture the

complexities of social experience. Thus, while the observations provided me important contextual information in the development of further methods, the identity pages and focus groups were designed to have direct engagement with young people, and to emphasise their voices.

3.1.1 Capturing Complexity

As I have discussed my poststructuralist position at length in Chapter One, I do not wish to dwell on these debates in great depth in this section. It may however be useful to provide some reminders of my philosophical approach at this stage, as a cultural researcher's philosophical position frames not only their methods of interrogation, but also the questions that they ask. As Bryman has argued "[q]uestions of ontology cannot be divorced from issues concerning the conduct of social research" (2004: 19), and I would suggest that neither too can questions of epistemology. Asking these questions are of particular importance when researching people from different cultural groups to ourselves as our research plays an ideological role. This can be understood in terms of both the "construction and reproduction of academic 'common sense' about young people" (Griffin, 1993: 2) as well as how gender is reproduced by research methods (Järviluoma, Moisala and Viikko, 2003: 18-20).

In my poststructuralist approach I have argued that reality is subjective and produced through discourse. For individuals, meaning and understanding, '*reality*', are "constructed in and through interaction" (Bryman, 2004: 18), and so "each different construction brings with it, or invites, a different kind of action from human beings" (Burr, 2003: 5). Thus, there are multiple 'realities' all of which can be analysed and investigated through research. Further to this, the realities are simultaneously constructed through the research process itself. This means that when investigating contemporary youth taste cultures one must approach the study using methodologies that are able to take into

account the subtleties and complexities of these subjectivities. To respond to this issue, the methodologies that are employed in this thesis are ones that are able to capture these nuances as best possible and qualitative techniques are particularly good at achieving this. However, to build on these advantages I have developed methods that place the voices and experiences of young people at the forefront a means of ensuring that my work is useful by being “*resonant* with actual experience” (Gauntlett, 2007: 183, emphasis in original).

3.1.2 Reflexivity

Reflexivity within the production of knowledge is of high significance, particularly when exploring the identities of other people. On one level reflexivity encourages us to think about the ways in which the stories that participants offer of their identity are *versions*, “selectively working up coherence and incoherence, telling historical stories, presenting and indeed, constituting an objective, out-there reality” (Potter, 1997: 146), which ties in with the constructivist approach to the investigation of social and cultural life. Similarly, reflexivity is also important for the researcher, and this is my primary concern in this section. Reflexivity is important for researchers as we must be able to reflect on how our conclusions and theories have been arrived at, as well as the potential fallibilities of our methodological approaches. Mixed methods, such as those used in this study, are a good way of accommodating a period of reflexivity, providing a period of time to reflect upon findings as well as the processes that came to form them. One of the central ways in which reflexivity can be achieved is by recognising our role as researchers, and in particular the impact that our social and cultural backgrounds have on our research as well as the researched (Breuer et al., 2002: 1). In reference to Harraway, Gray claims that the social and cultural background of the researcher can provide “particular privileged insight” (2003: 34) into the experiences of the social group being investigated. To exemplify this Gray describes how Stuart Hall’s personal experiences were central to his insight into the

processes of power and discrimination experienced by people of colour within Britain (2003: 33-4). Thus, my position as a white, (cis)female, working-class researcher that is conducting research within the geographical area in which I experienced my own youth is of significance to this study. As Järviluoma, Moisala and Vilkkö have noted, it is “[o]nly by becoming conscious of his/her gender position the researcher is able to create some distance from the gendered perspective from which he/she makes the interpretation” (2003: 22) and I believe that this should be extended to include any identity that the researcher holds.

Being a white adult I occupy a position of power. Through my reflexive approach I therefore acknowledge the privileges of my racial identity in an attempt to respond to the “plethora of power struggles” (Dunbar, Rodriguez and Parker, 2001: 281) that exist between myself and participants of colour. Many of the focus group participants are white, in much the same way that the majority of young people in Norfolk are white. There is not an absence of young people of colour in this research but race is not given analytical focus. However I do believe that explorations of the discursive (re)production of race and taste should be undertaken in future research. I also urge further research to take the framework adopted here and explore the (re)production of identities at the level of class and ability, and beyond. However, as the focus of this research is on identity at the intersection of youth and gender to give questions of race, class and/or ability the attention that they deserve is beyond the scope of this project.

Finally, as my research is concerned with young people it is important that I am able to reflect on my position as an adult in relation to them. This raises a number of areas of reflection in terms of hierarchies of age and issues of memory and space. This latter point is particularly significant as my youth took place in the same geographical space as the participants. In the first instance, Stockton sees ‘the child’ to be a problem because it is

“simply who we are not, and in fact never were. It is the act of adults looking back” (2009: 5), and thus as adults we can never really *know* children. This is exacerbated further by the often “enormous chasm of power that separate grown-ups and young people” (Ferguson, 2001: 13). In terms of memory and geography, occupying a reflexive position allows me to minimise the influence my memories have on my reading of the participants’ experiences. Thus, having grown up in Norfolk brings both strengths and weaknesses to this study. I have a rich understanding of the area and knowledge of the spaces that participants talk about. However, I have also engaged and engage with the spaces in very different ways to them. I either view these spaces in relation to the past and thus through memory, or in the present but as an adult. As Thorne has argued memory is both “obstacle and resource in the process of doing work with kids” (1993: 7). It is also important that I ensure my memories do not “take us away from our informant’s understanding of the social world and then turns them back on ourselves” (Biklen, 2004: 724). I therefore follow Biklen who also argues that “ethnographers need to name and interrogate the memories that we face when we research young people” (2004: 724).

Broadly speaking I am keen to ensure that my insights into reality are not read as superior or more legitimate to those of the young people I research simply because I hold the position of white, adult, researcher. To confront this I use reflexivity as a means of balancing the assumed role of ‘expert’ in the interpretation of findings alongside maintaining respect for young people’s ability to speak of their own experiences. I therefore believe that it is key that any researcher reflects on their social and cultural backgrounds, and considers the impact that this will have on their production of knowledge as “we cannot speak from nowhere, but from where we are positioned socially, culturally and politically” (Gray, 2003: 33). I therefore strongly believe that in this research the emphasis must be placed on learning *from* youth, rather than *about* youth (Biklen, 2004:

726; Ferguson, 2001: 14) and this can only be achieved when we researchers are reflexive and the voices of young people are emphasised.

3.1.3 Ethical Considerations

When working with young people as research subjects there are a range of ethical considerations that must be taken into account as they are considered a 'vulnerable group' (ESRC, 2009: 8). The core age of my research subjects is 14-years-old, and thus ethical approval was granted from the university's ethics committee at all three stages of primary data collection. In the first instance I ensured that I was covered by a Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) check in all elements of research where I was directly engaging with young people.¹² I discuss my bespoke approach to issues of consent and confidentiality in relation to each research method used below, and thus in this section I wish to outline the ethical principles that I bring to this project.

In this work I ensured that there was no harm to my participants through practical and reflexive decision making. Consent was gained through clear communication of the research aims to all necessary parties, and as this research involved young people this also included the approval of parents/guardians. Through this clear communication of intent I did not deceive participants or their related parties at any time. I ensured that I was open and honest with all those involved in the research at all times. However, there were some areas that were out of my control. As my research project required young people to reflect upon elements of their identity, specifically gender, I provided them details of the Mancroft Advice Project (MAP), a registered charity in Norfolk who offer free counselling to individuals between the ages of 11-19. In advance to the collection of data I approached MAP and they agreed to be listed as a point of contact to participants who may have

¹² The CRB check has since been replaced by the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS), but this did not come into effect until after all data collection had been completed.

wished to discuss further any element of their identity as a result of their participation in my research project.

An underlying principle of this research has been to ensure that in order to answer the research questions, the findings were informed directly by the experiences of young people. I felt it was crucial that the experiences of young people were therefore at the forefront of the data collection at each level. In the early stages I therefore decided to draw upon the ethnographic tradition within feminist studies by undertaking an exploratory ethnography that would be used to inform the research design in conjunction with the research questions. By spending time with the young people that I wanted to research I was able to reflect on the sample, the site of analysis, and importantly the tools of data that I would use. What the exploratory ethnography also allowed for was the development of a first-hand understanding of youth cultures, ensuring that my theoretical research was continually being informed by my time in the field.

3.2 Exploratory Ethnography

As noted above, the aim of using this method was to provide contextual data, enabling the development of relevant methodologies, as well as offering insight into contemporary youth culture more broadly. In this sense, the exploratory ethnography could be conceived of as a 'pilot' study, as it "gather[s] basic information about the field before imposing more precise, and inflexible methods" (Fielding, 1993: 137). However, I am uneasy about describing it as such because the intention of using it was to allow me to think about different methods, rather than refining the ethnography, necessarily.

Ethnography was an appropriate exploratory method to use as it involves 'getting close' and "becoming part of the 'natural setting'" (Fielding, 1993: 156-157). Spending time with young people therefore allowed me to observe their conversations and practices,

allowing me to discover their interests and thoughts about particular topics, as well as how they move around in their everyday spaces.

Methodologies that include observation have been utilised by academics seeking to understand the youth experience as it allows researchers the opportunity to engage directly with the lived experiences of young people. For example, in seminal studies such as Willis' *Learning to Labour* (1978) the longitudinal and immersive nature of ethnography was emphasised as the reason for why he was able to get the 'lads' to open up. This allowed Willis to develop a far greater depth of understanding than short-term or quantitative methods could allow (Willis, 1978: 5). Perhaps due to Willis' success in capturing the youth experience, a number of academics have undertaken ethnographies within school environments (Nayak and Kehily, 2008; Ging 2005; Hey, 2002; Blackman, 1998). Blackman, for example, argues that ethnography is particularly useful as it "places an emphasis on lived meanings" (1998: 208). This helps to consolidate some of the problems highlighted above regarding the complexities of identity articulation by locating young people in particular cultural contexts. The depth of understanding that is offered by ethnography therefore allowed me to develop a good understanding of contemporary youth culture and thus inform the development of an appropriate method of data collection.

3.2.1 Undertaking the Exploratory Ethnography

This research took place as a small-scale participant observation of a co-ed high school in Norfolk, known henceforth as City High (further details of the school are outlined below) during the Spring and Summer terms of 2010.¹³ The observation undertaken during this stage of the research process did not involve direct engagement with young people; this is

¹³ During the first year of the research process alongside the analysis of literature.

because I was a passive observer rather than active in the classroom. Following McCormack's (2012) approach to ethnography, I presented myself as personably as possible during moments of interaction. Thus, when moments of exchange were appropriate I appear (and indeed was) "appreciative of their engagement with me" (McCormack, 2012: 16). I did take a small amount of notes when in the presence of the students, but I minimised this as much as possible in order to "reduce the visibility of the research process" (McCormack, 2012: 16). As this ethnography was designed to be exploratory rather than a primary site of data collection, in-depth notes were not recorded.

What these observations provided me was contextual information, allowing me to see how young people communicate with one another and the sort of things they talk about. Observation took place in timetabled lessons, the playground, and the library on Mondays. By observing lessons on a Monday I was also able to hear young people talking about the things that they had done over the weekend, including films that they had seen, television that they had watched and the activities that they had undertaken. In addition to this, on Mondays a number of Humanities lessons were timetabled, therefore there was more opportunity for 'legitimate' conversations of culture to be discussed.¹⁴ I then liaised with one of my contacts at City High to select a cohort to observe. As this study focused on early-to-mid-teenagers as a sample age, we decided to select one year-nine student whose timetable we could follow. Doing so ensured that I was able to observe the same group of people over time, achieving this because at this school year nine is organised through setting and streaming, where classes across the timetable were made of students with similar academic abilities. This allowed me to observe how a group of young people interact over a period of time, and due to the structure of the timetable, I was able to

¹⁴ I label this talk 'legitimate' as it can be connected to the discipline of study, rather than being wholly 'extra-curricular' in content. Dance lessons are a good example of this as many of the conversations centred around music.

observe interaction amongst young people that knew each other considerably well. This is an important factor as it meant that there was rapport amongst members of the group (as well as some tensions). Also important to note is that because of setting and streaming, students were all of similar academic abilities, and thus the voices that I was given access to were narrower than if the group was more varied. This is further problematised as the group that I observed were those labelled ‘gifted and talented’ (henceforth, ‘G and T’), and thus include students that come from backgrounds where education is largely valued and where students have the time and space to invest in their educational development.¹⁵ Therefore, while the students that I observed came largely from lower-socioeconomic backgrounds (see the City High description below); they were often from more comfortable backgrounds than some of their peers.

The Monday school timetable operated on a fortnightly basis, during which the following classes were observed:

	Period One	Period Two	Period Four	Period Five
Week One	Art	Citizenship	Religious Studies	Dance
Week Two	Art	Art	History	Geography

Each week Science took place in period three (after the morning break and before lunch), during which I either spent my time in the school’s library where I wrote up my notes, or undertaking work outside of the school grounds. While I felt that it would have been

¹⁵ In my experience working with schools and liaising with teachers, it seemed that ‘G and T’ students were most often the ones to engage with projects such as mine (or similar university-led activities). The reasons for this seemed twofold. On a practical level I was told that ‘G and T’ students tended to come from more stable backgrounds and were more likely to return permission slips and consent forms. On a strategic level it was suggested to me by one of the teachers that ‘G and T’ students ‘give a better impression of the school’ and thus would be more likely to be selected for observation by gatekeepers.

interesting to observe the students in Science, the teacher asked that I not be present and I obliged their request.

The exploratory ethnography was invaluable in allowing me to garner an understanding of the sort of things relevant to young people, and allowed me to frame the research methods that would help me to best answer my research questions.

3.2.2 How did the exploratory ethnography impact upon my methodological choices?

While the pilot-style ethnography was useful in terms of developing initial understandings of young people, it was also most beneficial in highlighting the limitations of participant observation and ethnography as a methodology through which to understand the relationship between youth, gender and taste. The biggest problem with this method in terms of my research questions was its breadth. Instead, the project required a method more focused to questions of gender and taste more specifically.

As well as not being sufficiently focused, the exploratory ethnography also revealed the more practical difficulties of answering my research questions through observational methods. I learned that with large groups of young people it is very difficult to focus on particular conversations between group members; instead I was forced to focus on those that were loudest, or those physically closest to me. This means that in terms of collecting meaningful data my findings would have been disproportionately slanted towards those young people that have the confidence to speak loudly, leading to marginal groups of people being vastly underrepresented. I also found the balance of developing rapport with the group, while still not trying to give too much away about my own identity and tastes to be difficult. The young people that I observed were highly perceptive, the clothes that I wore while observing, the facial expressions I held when they were talking to me were all

likely to impact on how they made sense of me and thus respond to me. However, I did find that undertaking analysis within the schools would be very useful, highlighting what a rich site of data collection it can be.

Space for Data Collection

The exploratory ethnography was illuminating, providing an understanding of contemporary youth cultures that informed the development of the methods that were used. For example, I did find that the school would not just be a legitimate site of study, but a fruitful one too. This is because I found that articulations of taste and of cultural consumption were present across the school day. In addition to this I found that school was also a space where taste was regulated through discourses of appropriateness (as theorised in the previous chapter). In the most explicit example of this I observed two boys discussing metal music, with one boy asking the other which band they preferred out of a choice of two. In this conversation there was clearly a 'right' and a 'wrong' answer, and it was important that the right 'favourite' was picked. This demonstrated to me that school would provide a useful space for the collection of data for analysis. In addition to this, it revealed to me that taste regulation is something that does happen within contemporary youth culture, and thus the research questions that I ask were relevant to the social demographic being studied.

Young People and Digital Cultures

During the observation I also found that young people enjoyed engaging with digital technologies. This finding emerged from interactions that I observed both in the classroom (during a Citizenship lesson where research took place in a computer room) and also in breaks at the library where a group (of mostly boys) played games on the few computers that were available. Mobile telephones and MP3 players were also highly present across the

day, being used in lessons, at breaks and in the corridors. Resulting from this I began to think about the different ways in which digital technologies could be incorporated into the research design as a means of engaging young people (participants) with a tool that they enjoy and are comfortable using. This led me to notice the absence of digital technologies being used within cultural studies to empirically explore the cultural lives of people. In reflecting on the prevalence of social networking sites, which the young people I observed often talked about, I decided to incorporate the framework of social networking site with my research methods. As I discuss in greater depth below, the framework of social networking sites offer an excellent way of exploring taste. This is because space for articulating cultural preferences is one of the main ways in which identity is performed and (re)produced in these online spaces.

Relevant Avenues of Analysis

The final way in which the exploratory ethnography informed the design of the research tools was in providing a sense of young people's cultural practices, and thus provided an understanding of what cultures were relevant to their lives. The main studies of taste and cultural reproduction have focused more on traditional cultural activities and genres. For example, Bourdieu (2010) examined food and fine art, while Bennett et al. (2009) also examined the arts as well as working with broad genres rather than texts themselves. While these may have been the most relevant for answering their research questions, I found that these would not be the most relevant to the experiences of the young people that I was seeking to engage. Due to the distinct cultural practices undertaken by young people that I noted (and also identified in existing research (Nayak and Kehily, 2008; Blackman, 1998; McRobbie, 1993)) as well as the restraints to economic capital placed upon young people in their restriction to the job market through compulsory education, I altered the fields the fields identified by Bourdieu (2010) and Bennett et al. (2009) to

incorporate areas such as celebrities and websites. The ways in which I implemented these cultural areas using a method that utilised digital technologies will be elaborated upon in much greater depth below. What is important to stress here is that the exploratory ethnography was crucial in ensuring that these methods were as relevant to, and focused upon, the cultural experiences of young people as possible.

While the exploratory ethnography played a crucial role in this thesis, it was one that was developmental, highlighting the need for more focused methodologies within the main collection of data. In doing so the project had greater potential to develop an understanding of how taste (re)produces gender. These concerns have led me to focus my methodological considerations toward the rising field of creative methodologies as their increasingly prevalent use within youth studies has yielded meaningful and insightful findings. When combined with a qualitative method such as focus groups, which emphasise the collective construction of meaning, this project would be suitably focused to answer the research questions posed.

As the exploratory ethnography revealed the usefulness of schools as a site of inquiry, I decided that I would undertake the remainder of my data collection, the identity pages and the focus groups, within the school setting. Before discussing the development and implementation of the identity pages and focus groups in greater depth, I would first like to outline the schools that took part within this study.

3.3 The Schools

The schools were selected based on their geographical location within Norfolk and their willingness to take part in the study. Given the increasing pressure and time constraints that teachers face within the British education system my choices were governed primarily by their availability. The schools have been anonymised in line with the ethical approach

adopted in this project, including the terms laid out as part of parental/guardian and participant consent. Contextual information has been provided here to better understand the backgrounds of the data collection sites, but has been generalised so as not to disclose identity. Listed here are *all* of the schools that took part in this research at some stage, as each analysis of data is provided, the participating schools will be referenced. City High was the site of the exploratory ethnography, City High, Outskirts High, Boundary High and Suburbia High were all sites of identity page collection, and City High, Outskirts High and Girls High were all locations of focus group data collection.

Boundary High

Boundary High is a mixed comprehensive with under 1000 students from a low socio-economic background located in proximity to a city in Norfolk. The proportion of students receiving the pupil premium¹⁶ is above the national average. The school is more ethnically diverse than those in the region but is lower than the national average. However, pupils that speak English as an additional language is nearer to the national average.

City High

City High is a mixed comprehensive with under 1000 students from a low socio-economic background located in close proximity to a city in Norfolk. The proportion of students that receive the pupil premium is above the national average and the majority of students that attend the school are White-British.

¹⁶ Pupil premium is government funding for children that are from forces families, low-income families or children that are in care, who are eligible for free school meals or have been eligible for free school meals within the past six years (Ofsted, 2012: 7)

Girls High

Girls High is an independent school in Norfolk that has under 1000 students, all of whom are female. Students are largely from an affluent background and the majority of its students are White-British.

Outskirts High

Outskirts High is a large mixed comprehensive with over 1000 students from a predominantly low socio-economic background located in the outskirts of a Norfolk city. The school site is split into two (they do not mix until they are placed into 'sets' for their GCSEs). I have called each side of the split 'East Side' and 'West Side'. The proportion of students that receive the pupil premium is below the national average and the majority of students that attend this school are White-British.

Suburbia High

Suburbia High is a mixed comprehensive with over 1000 students that largely come from a relatively middle class socio-economic background and is located in close proximity to a Norfolk city. The number of students eligible for the pupil premium is below the national average and the majority of students are White-British.

3.3 Identity Pages

The aim of this thesis is to understand the ways in which gender is (re)produced in contemporary youth taste cultures. I argue that taste, and the judgements that young people articulate play an important role in how gender is discursively (re)produced by them, and that this is an inherently collective activity. The methodological procedure of this thesis therefore needs to be able to capture the nuances of identity (re)production and thus be

able to capture that “the whole presentation of identity is a dynamic process, an active production, continually achieved through verbal and non-verbal communication” (Gauntlett, 2007: 9). Above I said that to try and capture these complexities I have developed a mixed methodological approach. These include identity pages (that I describe below as being individual and non-verbal), and focus groups (that are collective and largely verbal). By bringing these methods together I am able to interrogate the ways in which young people are highly selective in their taste articulations. It is through an understanding of *how* interaction takes place within a group dynamic that we can interrogate the roles that taste cultures play in the discursive (re)production of gender.

By spending time observing young people, particularly in creative lessons such as art and dance, I was able to see the value of using creative approaches to engage participants in my study. I had also been able to observe young people undertaking some work in the computer room, which revealed their competency with information technologies. As a result of these observations I endeavoured to create an innovative method of collecting data that was able to tap into these skills and enthusiasms while also combining it with a group based investigation. This helped to ensure that my research was able to tackle the questions of collective meaning making. By liaising with educational technology specialist Abi Evans (University of Washington) and web designer Joe Naylor, I was able to create ‘identity pages’ that would then be used to inform focus groups.

3.3.1 Why Creative?

Creative methodologies combine many of the more traditional methodologies such as participant observation and interviews with the creative process, often through elicitation. For me, creativity is about the production of something, but more than just the act of creation it is the use of imagination as part of this. It has been noted that creativity can be seen in areas such as the arts (poems, paintings and music, for example), but I am

interested to extend this, as Horsfall and Titchen have done to include “the human skills and creative imagination processes involved in using any of these media [the arts described above] as either research processes or products” (2013: 52). In recent years scholars have turned to creative methods as a means of better understanding the complexities of cultural experience (Buckingham, 2009). For example, Gauntlett has utilised a range of creative methods when undertaking empirical studies of young people. These range from asking young participants to create videos about the environment (1997), to asking participants to construct versions of themselves out of Lego (2007). These types of studies have been complemented by work undertaken by academics such as Buckingham and Bragg (2004) and De Block et al. (2005), whose work has highlighted the usefulness of creative methodologies and asked the wider academic field to take seriously the contributions that creative methodologies make to empirical investigation and beyond. For example, Buckingham and Bragg (2004) asked participants to keep diaries and scrapbooks and De Block et al. (2005) asked participants to create both videos and collages within ‘media clubs’ as a basis for their research. In terms of understanding identity construction Gauntlett, for example, has chosen not to focus on the objects that the participants create as a source of data, but instead to use the creative process as a way to make “implicit knowledge explicit” (2007: 97) through elicitation. An advantage of this approach is that research participants themselves lead the discussions based on their responses to the objects on offer, thus minimising the role of researcher bias in the questions asked and how they are framed.

While all of these creative approaches to methodological data collection have proved highly insightful, all of them require engagement with physical objects and do not work with the creative potential of digital technologies. I see this as being a missed opportunity within youth research as a vast number of young people are so readily engaged with digital technologies. There are a range of potential limitations when it comes to the use of computers as a research tool with the digital divide being one of the biggest,

and it's also important to reflect on how visually based creative methods alienate those with visual impairments.¹⁷

I argue that digital technologies, and particularly online spaces, are inherently creative and thus provide an excellent space for employing creative methods. I believe that they are inherently creative because online spaces, in their digitality, can be easily manipulated and are experienced by each person that engages with them differently. As with other creative practices it requires active participation by the individual that engages with it, and due to the adaptability and potential for customisation of each online space it is much easier for the receiver to become the producer. To this end, engagement with online spaces evokes use of the imagination. What distinguishes this research from many of the existing projects that use the internet as a site of participation for research subjects is the creative ways in which they are being asked to engage. This demonstrates an important contribution this project makes to the field. The internet tends to be primarily used to disseminate questionnaires, surveys, netnography, or as a site for textual analysis (Kozinets, 2010). The internet "is vibrant, exploding and developing" (Gauntlett, 2000: 4) and has vast potential for visual and creative researchers, but this has as yet been vastly underexplored. Writing in 1998, Slack for example suggests that most of the papers on the world wide web "do not exploit the full potential of the medium" (Slack 1998: 5.1) and that instead of being *led* by technology, we should "employ its potentialities imaginatively" (Slack, 1998: 1.3). While the internet is increasingly used within social research, I still believe it has yet to be used imaginatively to its full potential. This is not to say that research that has used the internet since Slack's (1998) paper thus far is lacking in some sense. I certainly agree with Kozinets when he says that "one research method cannot be inherently superior to another

¹⁷ Developing further technologies that could respond to the limitations at the level of sight was beyond the scope of this study. Thus while those with visual impairments were able to participate in the focus groups, I must acknowledge their barriers to entry when it comes to the identity pages.

method. It can only be better at studying a particular phenomenon or at answering particular *types* of research questions” (2010: 42, emphasis added). But for researchers that choose to undertake creative methods, I believe we need to take seriously the potential of the internet. This is because it can be manipulated creatively, as well as having the potential to reach a wider field of research subjects and be stored and displayed more easily. As I have argued above, research that has used the internet as a tool has tended to follow more traditional methods. While I believe such research remains important, the full potential has yet to be unlocked in order to realise a better understanding of contemporary social identities such as gender and youth.

I do not wish to pretend that my research has unlocked all of this potential, but I do hope that my approach inspires future research to think about the creative potential that the internet holds. I show that we can use the internet as a means of exploring identity within contemporary culture. As well as being used as a source of data, these creative methodologies will also be used as a form of elicitation within a focus group setting. In understanding the elicitative role that identity pages can play, I will now outline the ways in which the identity pages were constructed and implemented within this study.

3.3.2 Designing the Identity Pages

By harnessing the creative potential of digital technologies and driven by my desire to engage young people in ways that are creative and innovative as a means of eliciting meaningful data, I have developed a new form of data collection for cultural research. Working with an educational technology specialist and web developer, I created an ‘Identity Page’ which was used as a primary site of data collection.

These identity pages were inspired by an art project that I was given access to during my time at City High, which involved young people creating a ‘personality’ image

around a standardised framework provided by the teacher (a rudimentary version is displayed below). This places the student's identity at the heart of the exercise, asking them to reflect on their cultural practices and connect them to who they think they are.

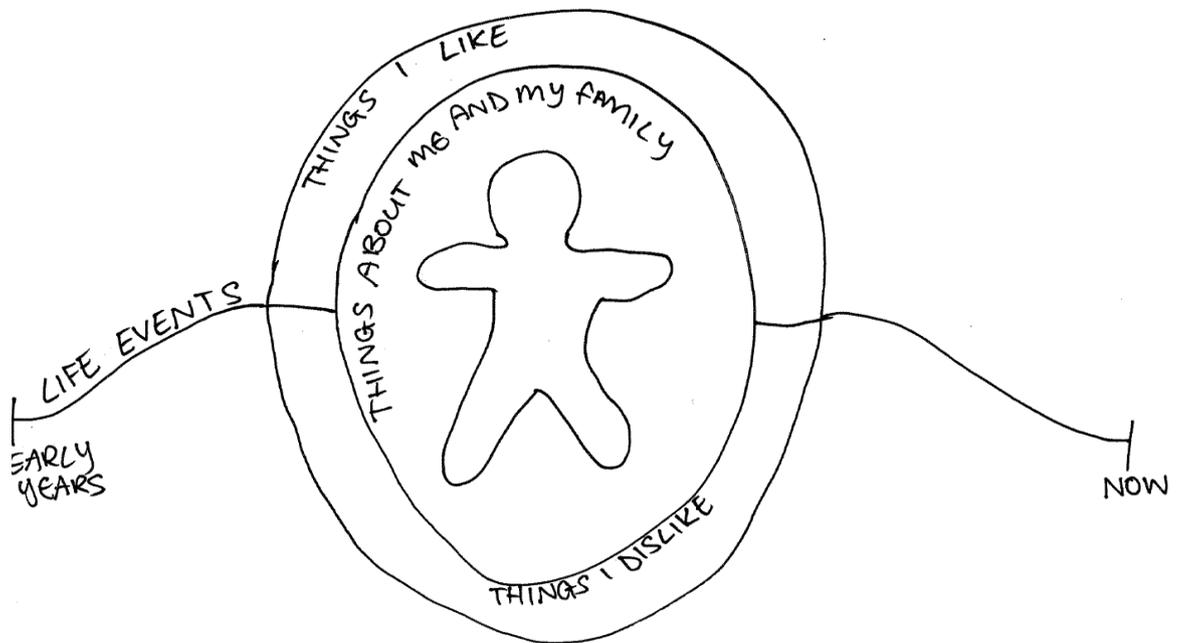


Figure 1 (Personality Image)

The basic framework adopted in this study was similar, with an adaptable visual representation of the participant in the middle. However, rather than focusing on the biographical narratives of the respondents, the outside space was instead devoted to their likes and dislikes.¹⁸ As discussed above, youth studies has a rich and growing history of using creative methods to explore the lives of young people. This project contributes to this field by bringing together elements of creativity and young people's interest in online

¹⁸ While the selection of life events and family information may be insightful for understanding young people's identities, they would distract from my focus on taste and gender (re)production. However, this framework could be used by other researchers that may benefit from using similar methodologies when investigating life events/histories and identity construction, particularly those from the youth transitions approach.

spaces. It does so through the creation of a space that participants could manipulate while also providing data for this study. In the first instance, young people are a media literate social group and engage with new media with great proficiency (Ofcom, 2010; Buckingham, 2005). Therefore, by having the early stages of research web-based respondents had the freedom to engage with a malleable space that they were somewhat familiar with. The root of the website was an identity page, and so respondents were asked to adapt the space in order to represent themselves by placing emphasis on the things that they like and dislike. In addition, as this was a space that they could also personalise, drawing on their experiences that many of them would have had from using MySpace or Bebo, and to a certain degree Facebook. The identity pages therefore also drew on the cultural experiences that many young people have by providing them with a space where versions of themselves could be represented.

Using a range of newly developed technologies, participants were able to construct their own versions of themselves, changing the background from a spectrum of colours and filling in the boxes around the central avatar with their likes and dislikes. The aim was that by creating a version of themselves and changing the background colours they could inject the space with their own personality and thus connect themselves to the process. This was based on the understanding that by seeing themselves on the screen and especially through personalisation users identify with the avatar (Boberg, Piippo and Oillia, 2008: 237). The activity was created to be as simple as possible, with easy click boxes so that as many respondents as possible could be involved. The setup of the identity pages and their adaptability is demonstrated in the screenshots below.

Part 2 - More About Me

Next I would like you to describe some of your likes/dislikes and your appearance.

The form is titled "Part 2 - More About Me" and contains the instruction: "Next I would like you to describe some of your likes/dislikes and your appearance." It features a central black silhouette of a person. Surrounding the silhouette are six input boxes, each with a "like" (smiley face) and "dislike" (frowny face) section:

- Television:** "Television I like..." and "Television I dislike..."
- Music:** "Music I like..." and "Music I dislike..."
- Celebrities:** "Celebrities I like..." and "Celebrities I dislike..."
- Movies:** "Movies I like..." and "Movies I dislike..."
- Websites:** "Websites I like..." and "Websites I dislike..."
- Other:** "Other things I like..." and "Other things I dislike..."

Below the silhouette is a row of six small square icons. At the bottom left is a "Background color:" label with a color selection box. At the bottom right is a blue "submit" button.

Figure 2 (Blank Identity Page)

As part of the process respondents take part in the activity by changing the background colours by selecting from the spectrum wheel, adapting the avatar to look like themselves and filling in the blanks in their own words to create a version of themselves through their tastes.

This form is a partially completed version of the one in Figure 2. The background is green. The central avatar is a female figure with blonde hair, wearing a yellow tank top and blue pants. The "Television" category is filled with "Law and Order: SVU, CSI (especially NY)". The "Music" and "Celebrities" categories are empty. The "Movies", "Websites", and "Other" categories are also empty. The "Background color:" selector shows a green color. A "done" button is visible near the "Other" category, and a blue "submit" button is at the bottom right.

Figure 3 (Partially Completed Identity Page)

To enable ease of analysis and the potential to look for trends, the research subjects were asked to comment on their likes and dislikes of a few key areas of consumption; music, film, television, websites and celebrities. This draws upon the areas featured in Bourdieu's (2010) and Bennett et al. (2009) studies, but also builds on the findings from the exploratory ethnography to ensure that the categories were relevant to the respondents' lives. In addition to this, rather than asking respondents to give responses to specific genres as the Bennett et al. (2009) study did, I asked respondents to write any text that they (dis)liked within a 200 character limit. This follows the idea that online, "writing is an essential component for performing identity" (Thomas, 2004: 367). By opening the responses up so that any words could be written I achieved a far greater breadth of potential responses than other approaches may have been able to. For example, in the Bennett et al. (2009) study participants were only asked to comment on particular genres (at the survey stage) rather than offer their expressions freely. As figures two and three show, respondents were given maximum possible freedom of expression within the context of the identity pages. However, should future research wish to compare my findings with those of Bennett et al. (2009) there is potential for researchers to place my findings into the genres they used and undertake a comparative analysis. As discussed above, not all of the fields explored in previous studies seemed relevant to my sample group after having spent time with young people during the exploratory ethnography. To respond to this, the fields celebrity and websites were added, while visual arts were removed. I believe that websites and celebrities will be much more relevant to young people than something like visual art as I found that young people often talked about websites and celebrities while never (that I heard) did they talk about visual art. While their lack of discussion of visual art is noteworthy its wider lack of relevance to the lives of young people within this sample groups means that I did not believe it to be the right avenue of discussion within this thesis. I also included a blank box, where respondents had the freedom to write any other things

that they liked or disliked independent to the categories I offered them – this could include visual arts amongst any other area of their lives they wanted to share.

3.3.3 Implementing the Identity Pages

After liaising with teaching staff at a range of schools in Norfolk, explaining the research aims of the project and the content of the website, four schools from the region agreed to use the identity pages within timetabled lessons. These schools were Boundary High, City High, Outskirts High, and Suburbia High, and the identity pages were collected during school time, under the supervision of a member of teaching staff.

The identity pages were collected in the Spring and Summer terms of 2011, with respondents from across the high school cohort (aged between 11-16, although I only received responses from those aged 13-16 years old). As the aim of the identity pages was to provide an understanding of young people's tastes in contemporary culture I did not limit the sample to a specific year of study. The website was accessed by visiting a secure website that was dedicated to this research project. The name of the website '*So This Is Me*' (www.sothisisme.net) was chosen to reflect its casualness, so that respondents did not feel pressure to perform a particularly 'serious' version of themselves that they may have associated with more formal surveys or titles. In total I received 78 eligible responses¹⁹ of which the majority described their gender within existing binary categories. In total, 38 respondents described themselves using words that denote a male identity and 38 described themselves using words that denote female identity. Two described their gender identity using words that denote a gender identity outside of the binary. The year of birth of respondents ranged from 1995-1998, with the youngest being 13-years-old and the oldest being 16-years-old at the time of data-collection. It was on the main webpage where

¹⁹ Submissions were removed from the data set if they were missing considerable amounts of data, were incomprehensible or if the submission was a teacher's 'test' version.

respondents were asked to express a response to the title, 'this is me' by manipulating the avatar and writing their likes and dislikes in the boxes detailed above. As I also discussed above, it was important that respondents were able to use their own words through the process so that they had as much control as possible over their responses. The identity pages were closed for further submissions in January 2012 in order for the analysis of data to be undertaken.

Before the identity page was completed, respondents were given full information about the aims of the research and their involvement in it; they were told that their involvement was optional. Additionally, should a respondent wish to take part in the activity but not submit their response, this was also possible as their contribution would only be submitted once the respondent clicked the 'submit' button.

I clearly communicated to all teachers that involvement must be optional, but as I was not physically present as data was collected I can only trust that this was enforced.²⁰ It was important to me that the website was as concise, simple and easy to navigate as possible. For this reason the website was restricted to three pages. This included an opening page that outlined the research and asked for the basic information described below (see Figure 4), the identity page itself (detailed above) and a post-submission page where I thanked the respondent for taking part and offering them a chance to win a prize.

²⁰ My absence at the site of data collection reflects a necessary limitation to this aspect of my study. As I was not present I was unable to ensure that the adults in the room did not have any undue influence on the participant's process of completing the identity pages. However, it was unfortunately not possible to be at all of the sites of study as many were undertaken simultaneously, and sometimes on an ad hoc basis when the teacher had an opportunity.

So, this is me.

The things I like and dislike.

Welcome

Thank you for agreeing to take part in my research.

I am trying to find out what young people, such as yourself, like and dislike. The information that you give here will be anonymous, but is likely to be published, as well as viewed by other young people as part of further study. By clicking 'submit' on the next page you agree that I can use this information in such a way. At the end of the study you will be given the option to provide your email address so that you can be entered into a draw for the chance to win a £20 play.com voucher and take part in further research, your email address will never be passed on to anyone else.

Please complete the following:

Your year of birth (YYYY):

How would you describe your gender?:

What school do/did you go to?:



Figure 4 (Website Opening Page)

Keeping the website to just three pages also helped to keep the participants engaged as it did not involve the respondent being consistently reminded that they were taking part in research, and instead allowed them to immerse themselves in the activity of representing themselves on the identity pages.

One of the main aims of the identity pages was to empower participants so that they were able to use their own words as much as possible, and this was a principle that was integrated across the design process. It was important that respondents felt it was a fun exercise and that they were able to engage with it easily. For this reason very little personal information was requested, which also helped to foster a sense that it was more about their taste than their particular social identities. Personal information was asked on the opening page (Figure 4) of the website and focused on gathering information about the respondent's age, gender identity and geographical location. In order to ensure participant anonymity geographical location was established by asking what school they went to, age

by asking their year of birth (anything more specific could have made them more identifiable) and gender by asking them to describe their gender identity (this allowed them the freedom to express themselves within 50 characters). By encouraging respondents to use their own words to describe their gender I was able to make space not only for non-binary responses, but also for variations on the language used to describe binary genders. As I discuss in the chapter that follows, a number of different ways of expressing gender were given, and this demonstrates the usefulness of opening up the space for self-expression. Also on the opening page was a consent form that when clicked, confirmed that the respondent agreed to their anonymous identity pages being shared with other research participants further down the line. This also made visible a potential audience to their taste articulations, which is important as the research questions are posed around ideas of collectively understood ideas of appropriateness.

The identity pages were useful in providing information about the taste cultures of young people from the sample area of Norfolk, which is explored in the following chapter. However, while also providing contextual information the identity played a significant role when used as elicitation in focus groups. The identity pages provided individualistic responses (with acknowledgement of the ever-present audience), meanwhile focus groups allowed me to incorporate a methodology that directly tackled questions of collective meaning making. The focus groups were therefore integral to ensuring that this thesis was able to answer the research questions set out.

3.4 Focus Groups

When we consider that this thesis is primarily concerned with interrogating the discursive (re)production of gender within contemporary youth taste cultures, a method that allows direct engagement with groups of young people talking about taste would be most insightful. It is for this reason that focus groups were used as a primary site of data

collection in this thesis. Silva and Wright have persuasively argued for the use of focus groups as a method for analysing taste and social position, claiming that: “[t]he construction of meaning in a socio-cultural context can thus be made explicit in group discussion” (2005: 10). Through focus groups we are given an opportunity to access a diverse “collective experience and collective understandings” (Gauntlett, 2007: 15). The complementary role that group-based methodologies play when combined with creative ones such as the identity pages can help us to consider the ways in which there is not one youth experience but indeed many (McRobbie, 1994). The data provided in the identity pages was used as a form of elicitation, allowing for discussion within a focus group setting as a means of accessing some of these collective understandings.

Focus groups are also relevant to this field because of the emphasis that is placed on collective meanings. It was crucial that the methods foregrounded collectivity as the emphasis of this thesis is on taste, gender and discursive (re)production which hinges on collective meanings and understandings. Focus groups are therefore so useful because they emphasise how “group members collaborate on some issue[s], how they achieve consensus (or fail to), and how they construct shared meanings” (Stewart, Shamdasani and Rook: 2007: 112). Through the use of focus groups rather than other methods of enquiry we are able to uncover the “richness and complexity with which people express, explore and use opinions” (Myers and Macnaghten, 1999: 174). This is compared to methods such as surveys that “miss the complexity and ambivalence of people’s reactions [...] by abstracting away from their situation” (Myers and Macnaghten, 1999: 174). This further emphasises the strength of the mixed method approach in this study as it is able to capture both the individualistic and collective nature of taste cultures and articulation.

Focus groups are good at accessing shared understandings and collective meanings, but they are also useful when exploring taste cultures more specifically. I have argued

previously that much of the empirical study of taste cultures has been quantitative in approach and this is perhaps because measuring preference involves simplification (Silva and Wright, 2008: 51). In Silva and Wright's study which involved the completion of questionnaires they said that "we reduced survey respondents to a series of clicks on a laptop mouse" (Silva and Wright, 2008: 60). This something that I have aimed to avoid by placing the voices of participants at the forefront of this study.

The collective nature of focus groups is therefore of particular interest when investigating cultural (re)production and taste because it is in collective spaces that distinction is generated (Silva and Wright, 2005: 76). Thus it is through the articulation and reproduction of distinction that we can come to think of taste cultures as a space where some judgements could be rendered problematic or inappropriate. Silva and Wight have noted the usefulness of using focus groups for exploring taste cultures in these terms, raising a point that is pertinent to the aims of this study: "whilst the rhetorical aim of focus groups is to gather opinions, one aspect of group interaction is the construction of certain opinions as legitimate, or illegitimate" (2005: 250). This ability of focus groups to reveal collective understandings of what is 'legitimate' highlights one of the central strengths of focus groups as a research tool in this thesis and is therefore a central motivation for its use in this study.

However, like all methods, focus groups are not perfect and in this study I am keen to ensure that I reflect on these limitations throughout. In the first instance Myers and Macnaghten make the convincing argument that "there are clearly ways focus groups are not like a casual conversation between friends" (1999: 175), with the main differences centring around the role of the researcher. In addition to this, some participants may play devil's advocate, being sarcastic or pushing the conversation to move in a certain direction. This is one of the reasons why full immersion in the recordings and transcripts is crucial, so

that the context of the speech or utterances can be as fully known as possible. In addition, I noted in the exploratory ethnography that some voices were heard more often, and thus some speakers may dominate discussions. Meanwhile, Silva and Wright have noted that participants from “disadvantaged or marginalised groups might [...] lack the skills associated with the expression and defence of their opinions” (2005: 13), and this is especially likely in discussions about taste and preference. I therefore see that it is my role as moderator to ensure that such instances are as minimised as possible, without being too disruptive to the conversation on the whole. I discuss some of these issues in greater depth in relation to ethical considerations below.

Undertaking the Focus Groups

Focus groups took place in the Summer and Autumn terms of 2012 at three different sites (City High, Girls High, and Outskirts High) and with four different groups in total. The focus groups were an important site of data collection as it was in this space that young people were able to discuss their tastes, as well as allowing me to ask questions directly to them.

3.4.1 Sample and Schools

It has been necessary to narrow the focus in this youth centred research. This is because the period of youth is incredibly diverse and universally experienced, often with young people “engaging earlier, incrementally in adult practices” (White and Wyn, 2004: 202). While the experiences of a 17-year-old will be markedly different to that of a 12-year-old, the experiences of those within each age is also incredibly vast. Having acknowledged this through observation during the exploratory ethnography, I made the choice to focus on young people aged 14 (late year nine or early year ten). This is because it is around this time that young people have been understood as “becoming more aware of their gender roles and what is socially appropriate for a male or a female” (Dumais, 2002: 59). In terms

of their position within the school, participants were neither the ‘new kids’ having just joined in years seven or eight, nor would they be transitioning to life outside of high school in years ten and eleven. These factors made participants aged 14 to be the most suitable for this study.

As part of the study the following focus groups took place with the following participants:

Group	School	Number of Sessions	Participants
1	City High	4	Erica, Flora, Jenny, Joe, Leticia, Mel, Pedro, Philly, Portia, Reuben.
2	City High	4	Anwar, Josh, Juan, Lauren, Mary, Naomi, Phoebe, Rachel, Sara.
3	Outskirts High ²¹	3	Anna, Chloe, Eliza, Katherine, Tom, Troy.
4	Girls High	2	Bea, Bella, Chocoholic, Clove, Effie, Melark, Owls, Primrose, Rue.

3.4.2 Pseudonyms

Although a number of participants did not mind having their name used, I felt that anonymity offered lifelong security and confidentiality to participants. As Thomson and Holland (2003) have reflected, should a participant decide in the future that they wish to be

²¹ At Outskirts High all of the participants were from the ‘East Side’ of the school except for Chloe who was the only participant from the ‘West Side’

anonymised when they were not originally this would require a challenging retrospective process of anonymisation for the researcher.

When asking participants if they would like to choose their pseudonyms not all wanted to choose names for themselves and many were happy for me to do so for them. In these cases I used common names that I felt captured their personalities. However, when participants did choose their own pseudonyms, they were often telling of their cultural experiences. For example, at Girls High a large proportion of the group used names that featured in *The Hunger Games*, a popular book that had been turned into a film around the same time that the focus groups took place. Other participants from this group chose words that represented the things that they like, such as 'Owls' and 'Chocoholic', indicating the central role that taste cultures play in their everyday lives. At Outskirts High, Troy chose his name because it sounded Roman and Anna chose hers because it was part of the name Anastasia, which was a Disney film that she liked. At City High, the majority of participants decided not to use pseudonyms, although Mary had toyed with the name 'Rumplestiltskin' during the course of the four focus groups before deciding on Mary. Juan, Mary, and Reuben gave no explanation for their choice of names, while Pedro chose his because he was a fan of the film *Napoleon Dynamite* (2004) in which Pedro features as a central character. The pseudonyms chosen are fascinating, particularly as a number are so heavily connected to the cultural lives of the young people that chose them, but it is beyond the scope of this project to explore them in greater depth.

3.4.3 Conducting the Focus Groups

In each of the schools I asked liaising teachers and support staff that I hoped to include students from a range of backgrounds and not just those deemed 'gifted and talent' (and thus most often given opportunities to take part in projects such as these). I felt that this was important as I wanted to ensure that a range of voices were heard and included.

However, while it was not always possible to ensure that a wholly diverse group of students took part, I was able to ensure that schools from different socio-economic catchment areas took part, which means that a variety of young people were included. Unfortunately, despite a number of requests and connections made with all-male institutions I was unable to secure a focus group with all male respondents. Given that I have an all-girl group this is very regrettable, but it does reflect the difficulties and limitations of gaining access to young people within social and cultural research (especially when schools are increasingly pushed for time and resources). In addition to this, it was much more difficult to find boys that were willing to participate or gain parental consent – my contacts at the schools commented that it was common for boys to ‘not return permission slips’ from home. I acknowledge that this is a limitation within this research, but this is nevertheless a much wider issue that the scholars of youth research face when investigating the lives of young people, particularly boys.

One of the benefits of school-based focus groups is that the participants already know each other, they may already be friends with them and if not they are often from the same form or share the same spaces in year based activities. As the participants already know each other the method provides “an ideal source of data on the discursive practices surrounding group norms, particularly where they are drawn from pre-existing social groups” (Frankland and Bloor, 1999: 153). As the groups were pre-existing, group norms and the shared meanings need not be learned in the same way as if the participants had no knowledge of the other group members. What this allows me to do is see how the group *already* negotiates and (re)produce discourses. This is important as I am keen to understand how these discourses are (re)produced in everyday settings; rather than constructing artificial groups of young people that have no relation to one another. I aimed to discover how young people discursively (re)produce gender through taste by using the identity pages as prompts.

The focus groups lasted between 40 and 55 minutes per session, depending on the specific context, such as time spent setting up as well as the length of slot timetabled for participants. The focus groups were recorded using a digital audio recorder, as well as a digital camcorder and tripod. The reason for using both instruments was to ensure that high quality audio was recorded, as well as video images so that participants could be identified when speaking. This is particularly important when undertaking focus group research with young people as not only is there the issue of overlapping speech, but due to the physiological development of the participants many of their voices sound similar. Therefore video recording was crucial in order to observe who was speaking at any given moment as well as further contextual information such as faces being pulled that may impact on the meaning of the words being said. Gaining consent so that video material of young people could be collected was sensitively handled, and the intention to record and the safekeeping of the recordings was clearly communicated in the participant and parental consent forms. In all but one of the groups I was the only adult present, however at Girls High a teacher asked to stay present. Although she was not in close proximity to the participants, and was marking at the time so was not active in the discussion, it must be noted that her presence may have impacted upon the responses given in the group. This is because the dynamic of power in the group is likely to shift when a person that is usually in a position of authority is present.

At the beginning of each session I asked all participants to sign a 'Respect and Confidentiality Form', whereby they agreed that they would treat their fellow participants with respect and would keep the content of the sessions confidential. The form was worded as follows:

"I will treat the other members of this group with respect. If I disagree with someone in this group I will respond with consideration of their feelings. If I don't

think that I can do this I will ask to leave until I am happy to return.

When this session is finished I will not talk about the things we discussed here with anyone else so that it remains confidential.”

When they signed this form, I verbally reminded participants that they were free to leave at any time without prejudice. Due to illness or a participants' desire to spend their time elsewhere, every session bar one (City High, Group Two, Session One) had at least one participant missing. This demonstrates that participants did appear to feel that they had control over their involvement in the project. Additionally, there were no instances where the participants chose to leave during the sessions, although one of the participants (Naomi) did say on one occasion that she did not want to contribute further to the discussion and sat in silence until the session finished.

Within the group itself a clear structure was implemented in order to make the most of the limited time that I had with the participants. However, I ensured that this structure was bespoke and could be adapted on a week by week basis to make sure that the activities reflected the nuances of the different groups and their dynamics.

In the first sessions I used the identity pages as elicitive prompts to get the groups talking on topics that were focused to the aims of the research. After two sessions of this I felt that the participants were tired of the predictable format, and I instead used television listings as a prompt, before returning to the identity pages and then undertaking a matching-up exercise in the final sessions. In the passages that follow I first outline how I used the identity pages as prompts, before outlining my use of the television listings and matching up exercises in the later sessions. Below, I outline the structure of the sessions and what activities were undertaken and when.

Using the Identity Pages as Prompts

One of the outcomes of the identity pages was not only the contextual information that they provided, but also their use as a prompt in the focus groups. By using a series of identity pages as prompts I was able to elicit conversations about taste cultures that showed the ways in which particular tastes were considered either gender appropriate or gender inappropriate. By using the identity pages as prompts the preferences that were discussed were more 'authentic' than if I had simply constructed one myself. In addition to this, the cultural texts that were mentioned and discussed emerged from these prompts rather than from my questions. This minimised the chances that my questions and their phrasing may have led the responses that were given.

In choosing what prompts to discuss in the focus groups, I was keen to ensure that a diverse set of genders were represented, but I was largely governed by ethics in the final decisions that I made. This is because it was considered ethically problematic to elicit conversations on topics that included cultural texts that were age-inappropriate and thus classified to those aged 15 or over. The identity pages revealed that young people often engage with texts that are classified (technically) out of their age range, following other research in the field (White and Wyn, 2004), and thus there were only a few identity pages that could be used as prompts. Of these remaining identity pages I selected prompts from two respondents that identified as male, two that identified as female and one gender ambiguous respondent. As a contingency plan, I also had three extra prompts that could be for elicitation should the participants have moved through the activity unusually quickly.

The prompts were constructed to mirror the identity pages, with the avatar and colour removed so that the participants had no visual clues as to the gender of the prompt writer other than their tastes (see figure 6 as an example). I ensured that none of the prompts were edited, and thus the writing style, language and grammar used all remained

as they appeared on the identity pages. This was all to help the participants to see a 'real' person on the page.

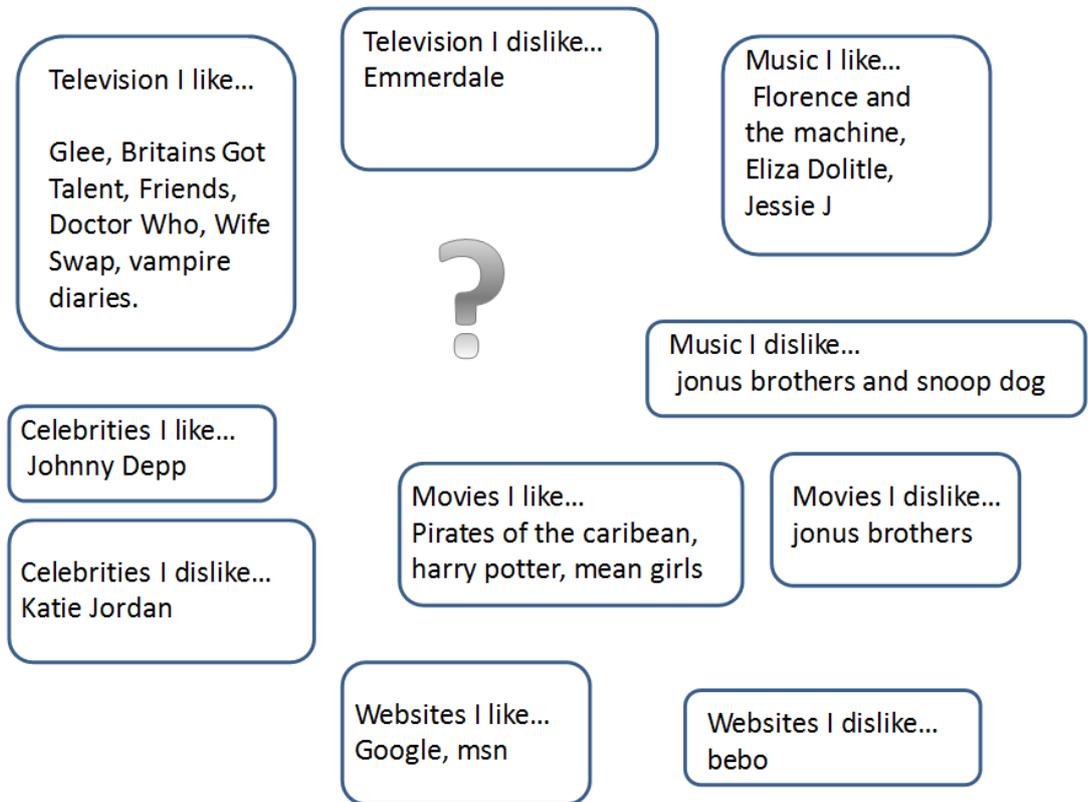


Figure 5 (Prompt 2)

Sessions that used the prompts began with me asking the participants what gender they thought the prompt writer was based on what they liked or disliked. Through this I explored how young people responded to the tastes of their peers. This is because my interest has been in how the tastes that people choose to articulate are read and responded to, and through this how ideas of gender appropriate taste are discursively (re)produced.

In order to get an instant response we went around the room where participants said what their 'gut responses' to the question were, and then how their ideas changed or did not change as conversation and collective understandings were worked out. What I

found refreshing was that across the focus groups participants were happy to disagree with one another, providing rich data for analysis. As my interest is in discursive (re)production, my focus was on talk and how young people spoke about the tastes of others, and at times themselves. As only information that the participants had to go on was the likes and dislikes of the prompt-writer, discussions that were directly relevant to the research questions emerged. I looked at how young people constructed their views about taste and gender, as well as how notions of what was appropriate on the grounds of gender were articulated. By knowing what gender (in)appropriate texts are, as well as how participants responded to them helped me to see how taste (re)produces gender. What I found to be particularly beneficial about the use of prompts was that it allowed participants to think through the nuances of gendered taste and respond to them accordingly. For example, one particular cultural preference may not be necessarily gender (in)appropriate, but when combined with other tastes it may become problematic. Thus the ways in which these judgements were responded to allowed me to see not only *what* cultural texts were deemed gender (in)appropriate, but also *why* they are. As the audience of the taste articulations render particular performances appropriate or not, the focus group were a central site of data collection.

However, as I noted previously, some of the participants grew quite tired of the identity page exercise. To respond to this I introduce a TV listings exercise that helped me to generate conversations that dealt with cultural hierarchies and taste.

The TV Listings Exercise

The activity grew from the desire to keep participants engaged in the focus groups and thus offer an alternative to the prompts. I provided a copy of some television listings (*What's On TV*, 2 – 9 July 2012) and asked them to imagine that they were new at school. In each

session²² the same prompt was handed out, which included six pages of television listings from Monday the 2nd of July 2012 (see figure 7 for reference). I asked participants to write down (see figure 8) and be prepared to talk about what television programmes (or films or music) that would comfortably say they watched the night or weekend before, and what ones they would not say they like and why. The aim of this was to have conversations that centred on the collective understandings of what was considered appropriate or not in the context of their school.

The image shows a television listings page for Monday, 2 July 2012. It is organized into columns for different channels: BBC1, BBC2, ITV1, Channel 4, and Channel 5. Each channel's section lists various programs with their start times and brief descriptions. A 'TV Picks of the day' section is on the left, featuring a 'Blackout' program. A 'Wordsearch' puzzle is located in the bottom left corner. The page also includes a 'DON'T FORGET - the new issue of' section at the top and a 'What's On TV is out tomorrow!' section at the top right. The date 'MONDAY 2 July' is prominently displayed at the top.

Figure 6 (TV Listings Exercise Prompt Example)

²² The TV listings exercise was used in all sessions except those held at Girls High as time was too limited at this school.

If you were new at school, what sort of things might you say you like or dislike to try and fit in?

~~_____~~ ~~_____~~

- sumptons 'cool shows'
- hollywoods
- ~~un~~ unbetweeners
- big bang theory
- how i met your mother

~~_____~~

What would you not say you like?

kids shows.

but personally make
 confident people won't change
 there use to suit others.

Figure 7 (Exercise Worksheet Example – participant names redacted)

This exercise provided a wealth of information about what was considered appropriate or not. It was also in this session where participants were most likely to defend their individual agency and their right to like what they like (as alluded to in figure 8). A strength of using television listings is that they are an everyday part of culture, and thus even if the particular publication is not familiar to the participant, television scheduling often is, and thus participants were readily able to engage in conversation.

Matching Up Exercise

The final exercise that was used to elicit conversation in all of the groups was the 'Matching Up Exercise'. This activity was born out of participants' desire to know if their guesses of the prompt-writers genders were 'correct'. I had initially decided not to reveal the genders of the respondents as my philosophical position is one that posits that there is no 'right' or 'revealable' gender, but the participants were strong in their requests and so I decided to build it into a focus group session. As I believe this thesis has emancipatory potential, one of the outcomes from 'revealing' the respondent's gender would be to possibly challenge (or of course confirm) their conceptions of what tastes are or are not appropriate on the grounds of gender.

In all of the groups the matching up exercise was the final activity undertaken. I incorporated the revelation of the respondent's genders into the focus groups by returning all of the prompts that the participants discussed along with small cut-outs that had the gender that the prompt-writer described themselves as and another with their year of birth. The reason for using both of these was to see what, when given options, discourses of age and gender would be (re)produced. This final activity was especially interesting as some genders were troubled, with the discussion of the descriptor 'inbetweenner' providing a fascinating insight into how young people make sense of the gender binary.²³

With each participant having a copy of the prompts along with the age and gender descriptors, I asked them to work on their own and match the prompt with the descriptors. I asked them to work alone rather than together as I was keen to see what their individual response would be after a series of conversations. This also allowed me to observe how participants negotiated their opinions with what were the collective understandings, to see

²³ This is elaborated upon in Chapter Six.

if they are (re)produced or troubled in some way. At the end, when I ‘revealed’ the gender of the prompt-writer further valuable data was collected, particularly when participant’s guesses were challenged by the ‘reality’. In these moments the regulation of taste on the grounds of gender could be most clearly observed.

Groups and Activities

In this section I outline what activities took part in each of the sessions and the location in which they were undertaken.

Group One, City High

<i>Session One</i>	<i>Session Two</i>	<i>Session Three</i>	<i>Session Four</i>
Prompt 2; Prompt 8	Prompt 4; Prompt 5	TV Listings Exercise	Prompt 9 Matching Up Exercise

Group Two, City High

<i>Session One</i>	<i>Session Two</i>	<i>Session Three</i>	<i>Session Four</i>
Prompt 2; Prompt 8	Prompt 4; Prompt 5	TV Listings Exercise	Prompt 9 Matching Up Exercise

Outskirts High

<i>Session One</i>	<i>Session Two</i>	<i>Session Three</i>
Prompt 2; Prompt 8	Prompt 4; Prompt 9 TV Listings Exercise	Prompt 5 Matching Up Exercise

Girls High

<i>Session One</i>	<i>Session Two</i>
Prompt 4; Prompt 5	Prompt 2; Prompt 8; Prompt 9 Matching Up Exercise.

In order to fully immerse myself with the focus group data, transcripts were manually hand-typed and not stored in any qualitative data computer programmes. This allowed me to become very familiar with the voices, words and intonations expressed by the participants. This furthered the rich understanding that I had gained of the focus group data as well as the characters of the participants. During the transcription process discursive themes emerged and were identified, and the transcripts were then re-evaluated with the focus being placed on these themes. In relation to this I understand themes as “topics that recur several times [...] or a corpus of such discourses” (Marková et al., 2007: 175). Through immersion in the focus group data I was able to make comparisons and contrast the data from across the focus groups against one another (Kruger, 1998: 17). Immersion also allowed me to develop strong familiarity with the data, which was crucial for me to be able to break the conversations into parts for analysis and discussion (Rabiee,

2004: 657). Once this familiarity was achieved, I was able to lift quotes that revealed discourses and their sense-making. Being close to the data therefore meant that I needed to be able to critically engage with it so that I was able to step-back from it as a means of reflecting on my own production of knowledge.

3.5 Concluding Remarks

The methodological approach to this thesis is one that responds to the diversities of the experience of youth – especially in terms of taste and gender. It utilises a range of qualitative methods as a means of interrogating the collective meanings that are (re)produced within youth taste cultures. The methods therefore account for both individualistic experiences of taste, as well as collective ones. The methods emerged from the observation of young people and were tailor made to respond to the specificities of their lives and interests. Through the exploratory ethnography the identity pages were imagined, and through academic collaboration they were realised. These identity pages were then combined with and complemented by focus groups which were invaluable in gaining access to the collective meaning making that takes place within contemporary youth cultures. The methods used are unique and are innovative, using a combination that has never before been undertaken. Their use was a direct response to the research questions posed, and the need to capture the complexities of contemporary youth taste culture.

In the chapters that follow I interrogate the findings that emerged from these methods of data collection, demonstrating their strength in providing a rich picture of gender (re)production in youth taste cultures. I begin by giving an overview of the findings provided in the identity pages, painting a picture of the diversity of young people's tastes along with some of the gendered themes that emerged. This chapter raises the question of, if youth taste is so diverse how does it (re)produce gender, and what are the motivations

for reproducing the dominant discourses of gender? These questions are tackled in the chapters that follow which place the focus groups at the heart of the analysis. I begin by elucidating the hierarchical organisation of high school, and the consequences for individuals that trouble the discourses. When combined with the chapter that follows, which outlines participants' understandings of gender and shows that despite many young people see the world in a gender binary. This belief that gender is attributable and binary, coupled with the need to 'fit in' that is established, an excellent conceptual framework through which to interrogate notions of gender appropriate taste is made. To begin this empirical analysis I therefore start by outlining the responses to the identity pages, outlining the key themes that emerged and discuss them in terms of my focus on gender.

Section Two: Gender and Taste in Youth

Chapter Four

Results from the Identity Pages

The aim of the identity pages was to develop a picture of contemporary youth taste cultures by seeing what sort of cultural texts young people say that they like and dislike. By exploring young people's judgements of a wide-range of cultural texts I can start to see if tastes are different for those that identify as male and those that identify as female. By looking at the responses given I can also start to show some of the different themes that emerged in terms of gendered value, which is to say whether or not texts appeared to be valuable to respondents of a particular gender (rather than a gendered value that is inscribed into texts – this would not be possible without speaking with young people directly). This chapter is therefore an interesting one as it provides important contextual information to the focus group analysis that follows. The findings raise questions of how the texts and judgements mentioned on the identity pages may be collectively understood in terms of gender. A further aim of the identity pages was to provide information to structure the focus groups as discussed in the previous chapter. One of the outcomes of the identity pages was that I could, as far as possible, use language and examples in the focus groups that emerged from an 'authentic' youth experience (in that they were articulated by a young person). It also allowed me to ensure that I was as familiar as possible with the cultural terrain of the young people I engage with in this research.

In this chapter I discuss some of the themes that emerged from the findings, paying particular interest to moments when gender seemed to play a significant role. In the most part I offer my own analysis and readings of the findings, but if the findings connected clearly to the themes that emerged from the focus groups I will also draw out these connections and explicate them further in the respective chapters to which they are

relevant. I will not attempt more nuanced discussions of what this means for the respondents themselves as this is beyond the scope of this method of data collection.

Using thematic analysis as a method of interrogation, this chapter discusses the results that emerged from the 78 eligible responses to the identity page activity. As noted in the previous chapter, the sample comprised of 38 respondents that described themselves using words that denote a male identity and 38 described themselves using words that denote female identity. Two described their gender identity using words that denote a gender identity outside of the binary.²⁴ The age of the respondents that took part was between 13 and 16-years-of-age. The schools that took part in this stage of the data collection were Boundary High, City High, Outskirts High and Suburbia High.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the structure of the identity page meant that participants could use their own words to articulate the cultural texts that they liked or disliked. Therefore the findings discussed here do not derive from pre-selected options, but rather from anything that the respondent could articulate in words, broadening possible responses. I focus first on the cultural texts that young people say that they like, before moving onto the texts they dislike. The understanding developed here allows us to start thinking about what sorts of texts are valued and by whom, providing context for understanding why some people say they like certain things and not others. As I show in the following chapter there are clear motivations for wanting to 'fit in'. These findings also provide context to the focus groups by giving us a bigger picture of what young people from similar cultural backgrounds like and dislike, giving specific examples of cultural texts in the process.

²⁴ The responses given by these two respondents were 'inbetweeners' and 'im confused i have both' (sic).

4.1 Preferences in Contemporary Youth Taste Cultures

The findings from the identity pages revealed that a wide range of cultural texts were mentioned, spanning genres and cultural forms. This suggests that young people are somewhat omnivorous in their tastes, but this is not surprising given the diversity of youth culture. This nevertheless makes analysis of patterns challenging, as Eijik has noted that taste (in the case of the omnivores) appears to have moved from “homogenous packages of preference into creative juxtapositions of heterogeneous elements” (2000: 208). However, while the omnivorousness of the participants may problematise any attempt to analyse patterns of consumption within youth culture with ease, what it does do is highlight the nuance and diversity of youth taste cultures.

Understandably, analysis of individual identity pages is unable to offer us understanding of how young people make sense of these preferences in terms of gender appropriateness. Uncovering and making sense of cultural consumption within the context of my sample group is one of the main aims of this chapter, and so while Eijik’s (2000) point that analysis of patterns is problematised by wide-ranging cultural preferences is relevant, there are a number of themes that can nevertheless help us to understand youth taste beyond the ‘mess’ that omnivorousness implies. One of the main things that I found about preference is that it is complex and diverse, urging us to ask questions about how young people can make meaning from this, particularly in terms of gender. As I argue in the chapters that follow, young people *do* have a clear sense of what their tastes mean in terms of gender, and thus the analysis undertaken here provides important context to the discussions that follow.

4.1.1 Young People and Mainstream Cultural Consumption

What I found in the identity pages was that although the responses were varied, many of the respondents gave examples of widely popular texts. This is to say that broadly speaking, the texts mentioned were both widely consumed (thus, high in ratings), as well as displaying signs of the 'mass' (Storey, 1997: 6-18).²⁵ This follows the claim that "[m]ass market commodities are woven into the fabric of children's lives" (Seiter, 1993: 8). The finding is thus a reminder that although young people have often been the focus of subcultural theories of consumption (Corrigan and Frith, 2006), we must not overlook the less 'exotic' texts that young people engage with.

Respondents of all genders mentioned preference for 'popular' texts. This is noteworthy in the first instance as the 'popular' is often seen as the terrain of the feminine (Petro, 1986) and so it might be expected that we would find girls and not boys articulating preferences for such texts. The gendering of genres, or at least the gendering of audiences, is therefore not straightforward within the context of youth.

Primetime Television and High-Grossing Movies

In order to better understand how 'popular' texts were discussed it would be useful to focus on a particular cultural form. Here, I discuss some of the trends in terms of widely watched and thus 'popular' television. Soaps were mentioned by almost half of the respondents (37 of 78), but not all of these were positive. Although Nayak and Kehily found that soaps had "ubiquitous appeal for young people" (2008: 146) this is not what I found in

²⁵ I apply these definitions loosely, as Storey's (1997) approach to the popular, which is one that I follow, contends that the 'popular' can take many forms. What I aim to elucidate in its use here is a conception of youth taste cultures that recognises the role of both 'popular' and/or 'subcultural', and that many young people *like* texts that can be conceptualised as popular. Understanding these concepts through the words of young people, the complexity of 'popular' texts is discussed by focus group participants and is discussed in the following chapter.

the identity pages. Of the 37 responses that mentioned soaps (either by programme title or by genre), 21 were positive while 16 were negative. When we consider the literature that exists on soaps, which suggests that soaps are made with female desire and spectatorship at the heart of narrative motivation (Kuhn, 2008: 225) it is noteworthy that 8 boys said that they liked soaps along with 13 girls. This suggests that it is not just girls that like soaps but rather a combination of both boys and girls (neither of the non-binary respondents mentioned soaps). Of the specific soaps that were mentioned by respondents, *Eastenders* (BBC, 1985 – present) was the overwhelming favourite, liked by almost all of the boys that mentioned soap and a high number of girls. Discussions from the focus groups revealed that most participants experienced watching soaps as part of familial practices, and thus parents or guardians may have played an important role in why it was included on the identity pages. Nevertheless these respondents still selected it out of all of their options for inclusion on their identity page. A further noteworthy finding to emerge in relation to soaps was that *Hollyoaks* (Channel 4, 1995 – present) was popular with just four respondents (and also unpopular with four). This suggests that within the context of this study, marketing something to young people does not necessarily mean that they like it. Consideration of this therefore requires caution when we attempt to conceptualise, or consider, what a ‘youth text’ might be.

Other widely consumed and (usually) primetime television programmes that were mentioned were located within the reality television genre. In this case 9 girls and 4 boys said that they liked reality television programmes. Although boys mentioned reality television all of their responses were for *Britain’s Got Talent* (ITV, 2007 – present), which in its ‘talent show’ guise is very different from the responses given by female respondents. A speculative theory for why this may be is because reality television has been understood as a feminine genre and boys have been found to distance themselves from feminine texts (Lemish, 2010; Ging, 2005). Of the texts that were mentioned by girls *Britain’s Got Talent*

was still the most popular (being mentioned six times), but variation can be found in the other texts that were mentioned such as *The Only Way Is Essex* (ITV2, 2010 – present; respondents 19; 76), *Jersey Shore* (MTV, 2009 – present; respondent 76), *Three in a Bed* (Channel 4, 2010 – present; respondent 102), *Wife Swap* (Channel 4, 2003-2009; respondent 17), *I'm a Celebrity Get Me Out Of Here* (ITV Granada, 2002 – present; respondent 92). This finding also connects to Frau-Meigs who argued that reality television within Europe reaches people from lower-socio economic backgrounds (of which the vast majority of these respondents were) and in particular “women and youngsters” (2006: 45). The quantity of texts girls mentioned also demonstrates a finding that emerged across the identity pages, whereby girls offered many more examples than other respondents did.

A similar pattern emerged in the findings when it came to film, too, with high-grossing films (from a range of genres) receiving a high proportion of mentions. For example, *Harry Potter* (2001-2011) was mentioned four times (respondents 17; 33; 48; 64) and *Titanic* (1997) was also mentioned four times (respondents 40; 46; 49; 130). Of the 123 different films that were mentioned (highlighting the breadth of responses), many were high grossing, crossing different eras as well as genres. While some of the films that were mentioned may not have been targeted directly to youth audiences (e.g. *Scream* (1996) or *Finding Nemo* (2003)), the responses that were given still indicate that young people engage extensively with ‘popular’ texts. These findings support the understanding that “contemporary American cinema tends to position teenagers at the center of audiences for blockbuster films” (Speed, 2000: 28). However, as with the responses given of primetime (popular) television, the specific responses for film that I received were highly varied. Not all of the respondents mentioned blockbusters, and so I am cautious not to make sweeping statements about the sort of films that *all* young people like. This variation is exemplified in the following section, where I outline the prevalence of comedic texts as found within the identity pages.

4.1.2 Comedic Texts

Comedic texts were very common responses amongst the respondents of the identity pages and the areas in which these were most prominent were in relation to film and television. Comedy was a central component in a number of the television programmes that were mentioned, and many of these were sitcoms. Comedies were mentioned in the preferences of 36 respondents (17 female, 18 male, and one non-binary), indicating their popularity across genders. As with reality television programmes, the comedy programmes mentioned were varied, demonstrating the plurality of texts liked by young people within the sample group. *Family Guy* (Fox, 1999-2002; 2005 – present) was the most commonly mentioned, being part of 12 respondents' identity pages. This is followed by *The Simpsons* (Fox 1989 – present) which was mentioned by 10 respondents. What is interesting here is that while television comedy was favoured by respondents of all genders, both *Family Guy* and *The Simpsons* were favoured predominantly by boys (10 of the 12 that mentioned *Family Guy* were boys, as were 8 of the 10 that mentioned *The Simpsons*). Although a large proportion of respondents that mentioned comedic programmes mentioned sitcoms, and these were relatively evenly split across genders (13 female, 12 male and one non-binary), there was much less variation in the responses of boys compared to girls. For example, other sitcoms that were mentioned by boys included *Friends* (NBC, 1994 – 2004), *South Park* (Comedy Central, 1997 – present), *The Inbetweeners* (E4, 2008 – 2010) and *Please Sir!* (LWT, 1968 – 1972), and although girls also mentioned all of these texts (except *Please Sir!* which seemed a somewhat anomalous response), they also mentioned *American Dad!* (Fox, 2005 – present), *White Van Man* (BBC Three, 2011 – 2012), *The Mighty Boosh* (BBC Three, 2003 – 2007) and *Two and a Half Men* (CBS, 2003 – present). These texts are no more 'feminine' in their construction, all featuring (white) male characters at the forefront of the narratives and so it is interesting that we see girls mentioning more *different* sitcoms than

boys. This is indicative of a much wider finding to emerge from the identity pages, that girls' responses were *much* more varied than boys. This suggests that for girls many texts are available to them in the articulation of 'appropriate taste', compared to boys who seem much more limited in their responses. The narrowness of masculinity has been a central finding to emerge through this thesis, and its presence in the identity pages demonstrates its persistence across the sample group.

In terms of other comedic texts, stand-up programmes or acts were mentioned by some respondents. For example, texts included *Russell Howard's Good News* (BBC Three, 2009 – present), which was mentioned by three respondents (61; 101; 112), meanwhile Lee Evans, Harry Hill and Michael McIntyre were also mentioned. In addition to these, comedy panel programmes also featured in responses. *Q.I.* (BBC Two, 2003 – present) was popular, as was *Mock The Week* (BBC Two, 2005 – present) and *Would I Lie To You?* (BBC One, 2007 – present). Taking into account the wider context, the total number of responses that mentioned comedic television texts were 36. This demonstrates its central position within the lives of the young people in the sample.²⁶

This preference for comedy continued within the world of film, being mentioned by 19 boys and 15 girls. The specific comedic texts that were mentioned were varied, demonstrating the variety of cultural texts that young people like in terms of type of film, country of origin as well as year of release. For example, while 17 different American film comedies were mentioned, there were also 11 British and 2 Indian, signifying a departure from the perceived Americanisation of contemporary youth culture (Osgerby, 2004: 124). In terms of years of release for these comedy films responses ranged from *Monty Python's*

²⁶ As a feminist researcher the prevalence of male centred humour (in terms of the performer) is concerning, as I found it was both boys and girls that were mentioning them. No female comedians were mentioned on any of the identity pages and *Friends* was the only text that had what I believe to be significant female presence.

Life of Brian (1979) to *Get Him to the Greek* (2010) and spanned a geographical range from America to India. Meanwhile 29 *different* comedy films were mentioned, demonstrating the variety of responses given. This further demonstrates the diversity of youth taste cultures and the ways in which there seem to be few texts that dominate youth culture. This is important as it reminds us not to make broad generalising claims about any kind of linearity in the cultural preferences of young people, even in less culturally diverse contexts such as Norfolk.

Through analysis of the identity pages we are able to see the prevalence of comedy within the lives of young people. By reflecting on the specific texts that were mentioned across film and television, I have revealed the variety of responses given by the respondents. Discussion of comedy plays a lesser role in the focus groups, indicating that comedy is gender-appropriate for all, following what these identity page responses suggest.

4.1.3 Intersections of Gender

I have thus far discussed some of the ways in which girls appear to have greater diversity in their tastes than boys, but this does not tell us much about what texts may be inscribed with particular forms of gendered value (as first discussed in Chapter Two). In this section I explore some of the responses where the gender the respondent identifies themselves as appears to play a role in their responses.

To continue in my discussion of film, girls often articulated preferences for a wide range of texts. Conversely, boys *rarely* articulated a preference for films that had anything other than a strong male presence, following existing literature in the field (Lemish, 2010). In addition to this, a large proportion of boys (22 of the total 38 respondents) wrote that they liked films that could be considered part of the 'action' genre, with three responses mentioning the word 'action' specifically (45; 94; 102). This follows the tropes of action

being a masculine genre, both in the focus of the films (Tasker, 1993), as well as the audiences themselves (Ging, 2005).

This theme is also continued when we consider the specific musical acts that were mentioned and by whom. Of the 13 different females acts mentioned, boys only mentioned two of them (Rihanna and Taylor Swift – both of whom were also mentioned by girls). In comparison, boys mentioned 24 male acts indicating boys' overwhelming preference for male rather than female acts. When it comes to girls we do not see this finding mirrored. Instead, girls mentioned 33 different acts in total (although this is skewed by two respondents (64 and 76) mentioning 21 acts between them). This further suggests that taste cultures are different for those that present as male and those that present as female. It is also interesting to see that these findings support Lemish's claim that boys do not engage with 'girls' media (2010), but contrast those of Ging (2005). Ging found that "although male bands and musicians were the most popular [amongst Irish teenage boys], numerous female artists were also mentioned" (2005: 35), whereas only two female artists were mentioned within the findings presented here. The reasons for this distinction in these findings are not clear, it may be because the boys' masculinity was affirmed in other ways or it may have been due to the distinctions between Ireland and Norfolk. It nevertheless does demonstrate the importance of undertaking continued empirical research with young people in order to ensure we capture the diversities and the complexities of contemporary youth taste cultures. What these findings also reveal is the limitedness of boys' taste cultures compared to those of girls who tend to favour texts from a much more diverse pool.

Girls and Subculture

Preference toward urban music was quite common across the identity page responses (of any gender). Meanwhile, preference for alternative musical forms such as metal, were

more clearly intersected by gender, usually being favoured by girls. Out of the 38 girls that responded, nine articulated preference towards rock and metal based genres, with some giving very detailed lists of acts and artists that they liked.²⁷ For example, one participant (76) wrote eleven acts on her identity page:

“You me st six, Good charlotte, bring me the horizon,
Vampire weekend, foals,arctic monkeys, the
blackout,bombay bicycle club,crystal castles,ed
sheeran, four year strong [sic]”

(respondent 76)

Meanwhile another respondent listed ten acts:

“bullet for my valentine , my chemical romance,
metallica, greenday, avril lavigne, slipknot, bowling
for soup and tenacious D, escape the fate ,
lostprophets [sic]”

(respondent 64)

This long list style of writing was given primarily by respondents that were fans of alternative music and is representative of some of the ways in which subcultural capital is displayed across the identity pages. Such examples problematise discourses of girls as teenybobbers and avid pop fans (Wald, 2002), while also challenging the notion of a “male (youth) rock culture” (Baker, 2004b: 77), as well as rock culture as being the domain of the masculine (Clawson, 1999).

As I have indicated above, girls tended to be more varied in their responses compared to boys, which helps to explain why there are more examples of themes within boys’ preferences than with girls. The most explicit area in which we can see an absence of girls compared to an overwhelming presence of boys is in the articulations regarding sport.

²⁷ This detailed articulation is not something that I found in the responses from boys, and as this was mentioned by some of the participants in the focus groups as being something they associated with girls I will discuss it in greater depth in the latter stages of this thesis.

Boys and Football

For the respondents that identified as male, football played a central role on their identity pages. Nearly 65% of all boys mentioned football, while just 10% of girls did. This follows some of the existing literature in the field, such as the CRESC study which found that with adults 2% of female and 26% of the adult males in their study favoured sport within the category of television (Bennett et al., 2005: 10). This indicates that sport plays a significant role in male taste cultures across age ranges.

Renold (1997) found that hegemonic masculinity was constructed through the exclusion of girls at the level of football play, and so it is interesting to note that girls are also excluded (or exclude themselves) from football when articulating taste. I make this claim because when boys mentioned football on the identity pages it tended to be extensive, with elements of football being found across the fields (such as television, celebrities and websites), and this was not the case with girls. If we couple the prevalence of football with Ging's finding that boys use media texts in both the policing and negotiation of masculinity (2005: 43), the centrality of football may therefore be of particular significance.

Of the 38 participants that identified as male, 24 of them referred to football on their identity page. As noted above, the categories that boys mentioned football in were varied, with many respondents mentioning football *across* categories. The most common category that football was mentioned in was the 'other' category, with the majority that mentioned it simply writing 'football'. This suggests that they are referring to the physical activity of *playing* football rather than engaging with football through screens. However, it is nevertheless telling of the centrality of football in boys' lives, where the playing of football has been found to have a "powerful role in the production and reproduction of male hegemony" (Swain, 2000: 96). In addition to the broad field of football being

mentioned in the 'other' category, some respondents also used this space to name any specific football teams they liked. As the respondents were all from the Norfolk region it is perhaps unsurprising that the local premiership team was often listed in their responses.²⁸

When boys articulated a preference for football on television a range of cultural texts were mentioned, although *Match of the Day* (BBC 1964 – present) was the most popular response (mentioned by six). Some respondents expressed preference for specialist channels or networks that showcase football such as *Sky Sports* (respondents 61; 153), and *Bundesliga* (respondent 61), while others were less specific simply writing 'watching football' (respondent 29) or 'sports' more generally (respondents 42; 45; 102; 109). After television, celebrity was another category where boys articulated their preference for male footballers. In many cases, more than one footballer was listed as a celebrity that the respondent liked. For example, respondent 111 wrote: "*russel martin, ward, whitbread, thierny, surman, wesley hoolahan, ruddy, chris rock, adam sandler, jackie chan, jet lee, grant holt, carmen electra, cheryl cole [sic]*", and respondent 106 listed "*cheryl cole megan fox ruddy russell martin ward whitbread adam drury Andrew surman wesley hoolahan korey smith anthony mcnamme simeon jackson grant holt lionel messi kaka [sic]*". As these examples show, footballers are not the only celebrities that these boys like, but the amount of examples given is very similar to the girls' subcultural responses. I therefore argue that this articulation of specialised knowledge is similar to a form of subcultural capital, which is "embodied in the form of being 'in the know'" (Thornton, 1995: 12). Of course not all boys that displayed a preference for football did so at such length, and this exemplifies the variation in boys' taste cultures and the differing ways in which boys align

²⁸ This suggest that *local* culture plays an important role for many of the boys, which is something that I could only infer about the girls. Analysing if a sense of local community is located in football fandom could be a fascinating site for further research, as some investigations have already started to ask these questions of girls in relation to areas like the bedroom (Kearney, 2007; James, 2001) and the shopping mall (Harris, 2004b).

themselves with what we could assume (in its presence on boys' identity pages) to be gender appropriate taste.

4.1.4 Concluding Remarks on the Cultural Texts Liked by Young People

Through analysis of the identity pages the wide range of cultural texts that young people like has become evident. The variety of the texts mentioned is noteworthy in and of itself. In the first instance it requires is to think of youth taste cultures outside of being a monolithic experience. Although, I did notice a wide range of different texts being mentioned, there were a few themes that emerged. These themes are useful in illuminating some of the ways in which taste cultures are different for those that identify as male and those that identify as female. Some of the findings also allude to the ways in which texts that have a feminine presence are valued less frequently by boys.

Through the analysis of the responses we have been able to see the preference given to texts that are widely consumed and are generally 'popular'. I focused on soaps, reality television and blockbuster films as examples of this. I also noted that comedic texts were also very popular amongst respondents, showing that it is not only popular amongst boys, as previous research has found (Kehily and Nayak, 1997), but with girls too. In terms of differences at the level of gender I found that boys tended to give less varied responses than girls did. This is not to say that boys gave predictable responses, but rather it appeared that boys are narrower in their articulations than girls are. As I explore in the chapters that follow much of this is due to the regulation of masculinity. Although boys *could* articulate more widely, discourses of masculinity and gender appropriate taste have been found to be more limiting than discourses of gender appropriate taste for girls. It is therefore interesting to see that the identity pages have been able to capture some of the complexities of youth taste cultures.

However, consideration of the cultural texts that young people like only tells us half of the story when it comes to contemporary youth taste cultures. Discussion of the things that individuals say that they dislike can also tell us much about cultural (re)production (Bryson, 1997; Bryson, 1996). In this following section I explore what young people say they dislike and analyse what impact this may have in terms of gender.

4.2 Cultural Texts Young People Dislike

Developing an understanding of what young people dislike is also important because, as Bryson (1996) has noted, much of the academic investigation into taste cultures neglects the things that people don't like. I therefore aim to present a fuller picture of contemporary youth taste cultures in this thesis. As with the texts that young people said they like, there was significant variation in the responses that were given. A number of different responses were given signalling the diversity of young people's tastes. Despite this diversity there were nevertheless themes that emerged, and these themes will be the subject of discussion in this section.

As argued above, the aim of this chapter has been to provide an understanding of youth taste cultures by looking at the specific texts that young people mention in the identity pages. Through the analysis of texts that are disliked by respondents I argue that we can begin to think about oppositional tastes, and how identity is (re)produced not just by aligning oneself to particular texts, but opposing them too. This is because understanding what identity discursively *is* also requires understanding what identity is discursively *not*. This is because, as Frith has argued, "the production of identity is also a production of non-identity – it is a process of inclusion and exclusion" (1987: 140). This section is therefore significant to this thesis on the whole as it helps us to understand the relational nature of youth taste, and how collective understandings of these oppositions (re)produce gender.

Interestingly when it came to oppositions many of themes connected to issues of generation rather than gender. For example in the category of music ‘old music’ was mentioned in a number of responses, suggesting a dislike for music that may be associated with the parent culture.²⁹ In one response parents were mentioned specifically, “*i don’t like 80//’s because my mum always puts it on [sic]”* (respondent 120). However, when considered outside of the category of music we do not see this rejection of the parent culture replicated. For example, films from a range of eras were mentioned favourably. This further demonstrates the nuances of youth taste, and reminds us to be wary of making broad generalisable claims about what young people do and do not like.

Another area that generation played a role was in relation to ‘tween’ culture.³⁰ Here, 10 cultural texts that can be considered tween were mentioned as disliked on the identity pages. It is important to distinguish tween culture from ‘childhood’ culture as a number of texts aimed at younger audience were favoured. Some respondents mentioned tween texts favourably, and so we are reminded of the nuances of young people’s tastes. This may therefore reflect the “interplay between ‘wanting to be grown up’ and ‘wanting the security of childhood’” (Mitchell and Reid-Walsh, 2005: 3). This idea is elucidated when we consider the ways in which childhood (as associated with much younger people) texts were mentioned. Here, I found that 14 respondents wrote that they *disliked* particular childhood texts (such as *Finding Nemo*(2003)), while 12 respondents wrote that they *liked* some childhood texts. This adds a layer of complexity to the claim that “young people are engaging earlier, incrementally, in adult practices” (White and Wyn, 2004: 202), because

²⁹ This raises a fascinating parallel to the conclusions of Warde, Wright and Gayo-Cal who noted that there were common dismals of youth culture amongst adults in their study (2008: 163)

³⁰ I apply the concept here as it usefully distinguishes tween culture (aimed at those between the ages of 8-12) from older teen culture. Despite its growing academic prominence (Kennedy, forthcoming), tween is not a word that was mentioned in either the identity pages or focus groups.

while we see the rejection of one 'young' culture, we do not see the rejection of an even younger culture.

I found that young people distinguish their tastes from those that are younger than them, but nevertheless temporally close to them. As gender appeared to impact on the responses to tween texts I will discuss this issue in greater depth below. These generational findings are nevertheless fascinating, and raise interesting questions about how youth taste cultures (re)produce the identity 'youth' itself. As this thesis is concerned with questions of gender it is not feasible to investigate this broader issue in any greater depth here, but I would urge further research to investigate the (re)production of youth through taste.

The final note that I would like to make about the findings of texts that were disliked is that less was written in these responses than were for favoured texts. For example, while 164 films were mentioned positively by respondents, only 48 films were mentioned negatively, with many responses being either very broad (mentioning genres), or being left blank.

4.2.1 Problematic Tween Texts

As mentioned above, the presence of tween texts on the dislike section of the identity pages can help us to understand youth taste in two ways. In the first instance it suggests that youth taste cultures (re)produce the category 'youth' itself. In the second instance it allows us to think about the role of gender in taste articulation, as the gender of the respondent appeared to play a role in the acts that they mentioned.

In the category of 'celebrities I dislike' Bieber was mentioned 7 times, and of these 7 instances 6 of them were given by boys. This suggests that what Bieber represents in terms of masculinity may be particularly problematic. Despite being older than the respondents, Bieber (at the time of data collection) performed a boyish and almost pre-

pubescent version of identity. In addition to this, Bieber may also be problematic in his predominantly female fanbase (as noted in a few of the female responses and focus group discussions – elucidated in Chapter Eight). Therefore, by articulating a dislike for Bieber, boys may be trying to distance themselves from the 'associative links with femininity' and thus the exposition of vulnerability (Nayak and Kehily, 1997) which is problematic within hegemonic masculinity.

Other than Bieber, the other tween texts that were mentioned were all female and all mentioned by girls. These findings challenge those of Duits and Romondt Vis, who found that younger female celebrities were favoured by the girls in their study (2009: 510). The presence of celebrities such as Miley Cyrus, Hilary Duff and Vanessa Hudgens³¹ suggests that, like Bieber, the identity they present is problematic in terms of femininity. It is noteworthy that these stars were all (at that time) connected to the Disney Corporation, and thus the type of femininity that they are associated with connotes fairytales, innocence and childishness. However, not all tween acts mentioned were North American, as exemplified by the inclusion of *Tracey Beaker* (BBC, 2002 – 2012) on two of the identity pages. This suggests that this is a much wider rejection of a childish femininity and/or culture. Developing an understanding of how such tastes are collectively understood in the focus group can therefore tell us much about how gender is (re)produced through the articulation of these tastes, demonstrating an understanding of gender appropriate taste. Another area that shows differences in the taste cultures of boys and girls is in the responses that boys gave about romance.

³¹ Again, at the time of the data collection all of these celebrities had yet to undergo their mediated 'growing up'. Cyrus was still performing roles in Disney productions at the time.

4.2.2 Boys Dislike of Romance

As the discussion above shows, there were fewer instances of gender playing a role in the texts that young people say they dislike, compared to the texts that young people say they like. This suggests that gender does not have much of an impact when it comes to the rejection of texts within contemporary youth taste cultures. However, there was one area where gender did appear to play a significant role in the responses and this was in relation to texts that can be understood as 'romantic'. Of the boys' responses (38 in total) 14 wrote that they did not like romance films, with 10 mentioning the genre specifically. In addition to this one boy explicitly positioned themselves against the female nature of the genre, writing "*Girly love films*" (respondent 22). This is compared to no responses of romance films in their likes, although some texts mentioned did have elements of romance, such as *Avatar* (2009) and *The 40 Year Old Virgin* (2005). These distinctions between genders become more pronounced when we consider that 10 female and one of the non-binary respondents mentioned a preference for romantic films (with 3 mentioning the genre specifically), compared to only 3 non-male respondents articulating a dislike for the genre. It is perhaps not surprising that boys reject romance given that it is heavily associated with female audiences (Radway, 1987), and thus articulating a dislike for it may allow boys to align themselves with masculinity. This is a question that is explored in much greater depth in Chapter Nine.

This finding supports much of the existing work within the field, and suggests an entrenched dislike of romance texts by boys. To contextualise, Ging found that boys tended to think of romance as appealing to most women and not men (2005: 34), Lemish found that boys tend to not like romance texts (2010: 110-112), and it is suggested that there is a much wider uneasiness of romance within boyhood (Invinson and Murphy, 2003).

This further shows that boys are less diverse in the tastes than non-male respondents. This could therefore indicate a much bigger in the difference in how taste cultures are experienced by young people on the grounds of gender, and provides motivations for investigating the impact that this has on the lived realities of young people in much greater depth.

4.2.3 Concluding Remarks on the Cultural Texts Disliked by Young

People

By examining the responses given by young people in terms of dislikes, a number of claims can be made. The first is that there were far fewer instances where gender appeared to play a significant role. This might mean that gender appropriate taste is more significant in terms of what young people like than what they dislike. I did note that there were some potentially interesting findings in terms of the (re)production of generational identities through taste, as young people tended to position themselves against adult music and tween texts. When it came to tween texts however there were some instances that suggested that gender also played a role in these tastes. This was most visible in the category of celebrity where, out of the people that mentioned tween texts, boys tended to reject male tweens while girls tended to reject female tween texts. I have suggested that it is the particular versions of gender that the celebrity represents that may be problematic to young people. When it came to romance texts boys very clearly positioned themselves against them, providing an example of how gender is (re)produced by rejecting the cultural texts that are associated with the audiences of another gender.

On the whole the findings in this section indicate that taste within youth culture is considerably diverse. When we look at the texts that young people say they like, alongside the texts they say they dislike, I have uncovered that cultural taste and consumption in

contemporary youth culture is both broad and nuanced. The identity pages therefore reveal the need to examine youth taste cultures in much greater depth, as understanding how young people navigate these diversities and make sense of them is a question raised by this research.

4.3 Contemporary Youth Taste Cultures: Concluding remarks of findings from the identity pages

The aim of this chapter was to uncover and examine the taste cultures of the young people in the sample group. Through analysis of the texts that young people say they like and dislike, this chapter has been able to illuminate the complexities of taste within contemporary youth culture, as well as raise a number of questions for further analysis.

The most central of these questions asks how these tastes are collectively made sense of by young people and how, in this sense-making, gender is (re)produced. This is because gender played a significant role in some areas (such as in football or romance), but was not as divisive in many other areas.

Analysis of the identity pages has been incredibly illuminating and has provided an excellent understanding of the contemporary context of youth taste cultures, particularly in relation to the localised youth cultures that are the site of analysis within this thesis.

Overall the findings have given further strength to the claim that audiences are not masses (Peterson, 1992), and this is no less the case for the youth audiences explored here. This chapter has demonstrated the breadth and variety of cultural preferences, and while this has made analysis of the patterns within these findings challenging, it has allowed the complexities of youth taste cultures to be explored. However, it is important to note that these findings relate to the specific group of people that took part in the identity pages, and may not be generalisable to the wider context of youth. What we can take away from

this chapter is a respect for the nuances of youth culture and thus an understanding that we should not attempt to simplify the youth experience in universalistic terms. It raises a number of questions of what these taste cultures *mean* for young people, and this is the subject of the chapters that follow. It is there that I demonstrate the ways in which young people make meaning out of these diversities. I argue that rather than being a series of diverse and individualistic responses, I uncover the series of collective understandings that underpin these diversities. Within these understandings I find that discourses of gender carve out what is appropriate for young people to articulate, and it is here that we can see the (re)production of gender in contemporary youth taste cultures.

Before I am able to do this I must first demonstrate why it is important to articulate appropriate taste, and an understanding of this can be found in an interrogation of the consequences of inappropriate taste. This understanding was developed in the focus groups, where through analysis I make the argument that school is hyper-regulatory, drawing on instances when transgressions were collectively punished within this context. The following chapter therefore helps us to appreciate why it is that we should be interested in looking at youth taste cultures as a site of the (re)production of gender, and the motivations young people have for ensuring that they articulate gender appropriate taste.

Chapter Five

The Context of Youth Taste Cultures: Fitting in at school

In the previous chapter I showed the diversity of taste within youth cultures. As part of this, questions of how meaning could be located within this diversity were asked. While useful in helping us to get a picture of what taste in youth looks like, the identity pages tell us very little about how this is translated into the lived realities of the young people I investigate. It is in this chapter, where I draw on focus group discussions, that the importance of working out what these taste cultures mean starts to become clear. It is in Section Three where I elucidate how this meaning is played out in the (re)production of gender.

The aim of this chapter is to discuss *why* young people's tastes matter, and *how* and *why* it is that young people (re)produce discourses of appropriate taste. By asking these questions I reveal the motivations behind articulating appropriate taste, and I discuss some of the consequences for transgression. To do this I draw on the experiences that the participants described as either having happened or their theories as to what they think might happen in hypothetical situations. I am interested in both their direct experiences and their expectations, as both can tell us much about the regulation that takes place during the period of youth.

I argue that one of the central elements to understanding how and why taste matters in terms of the lives of young people is due to their position in high school. This is because the participants discuss high school in ways that show it to be what I term a 'hyper-regulatory space'. Participants describe a concern about not fitting in as being a big part of why they think high school is different to spaces associated with other generations. Being *young* is therefore central to how and why taste can be understood to play an important role in young people's experiences of gender (along with other elements of their

identity). This is because young people feel that the tastes they articulate matter in terms of how they are viewed by other people.

Also in this chapter I complicate ideas of hierarchy at high school, drawing on the participants' experiences of high school as being more loosely organised than that. Participants generally describe school as being organised in a way that leads to most of them wanting to fit in in a general sense. It is therefore less about being 'cool', and more about 'not being marginalised'. Coolness, I argue, plays a role in the experiences that young people have in terms of taste, but coolness is not inherently connected with 'appropriateness' when it comes to gender. A taste articulation could therefore be uncool, but may nevertheless be understood as gender appropriate.³² This demonstrates the nuances of youth taste cultures and the importance of speaking to young people directly as a means of elucidating these complexities.

Existing research demonstrates that we can learn much about the (re)production of identity through taste and this has been the subject of discussion in Chapter Two. What I have argued is that despite some important studies we know little about youth taste cultures, how they are organised and how they (re)produce identity. This thesis therefore develops this field by examining the ways in which gender is (re)produced within youth taste cultures. In furthering this understanding we can think about the ways in which gender, or indeed any other identity, is (re)produced through taste and appropriateness. Examining the specificities of how gender is (re)produced in youth taste cultures is the subject of Section Three, what I develop in this chapter is an understanding of the role taste plays in the everyday experiences of young people. I show that taste cultures in youth matter and they matter as they are a primary site in the regulation of identity.

³² For example, a girl could like Justin Bieber, even if he doesn't hold much value in the wider context of school (see discussions in Chapter Eight).

5.1 School as Hyper-Regulatory

Due to the high number of young people that occupy the space, the repetition of the daily routines, and the ways in which it is organised into cohorts requiring that young people spend long periods of time alongside one another, I argue that high school is a hyper-regulatory space. I have defined regulation previously (Chapter Two) as either the self-censoring or selection of what ones says or how one acts based on one's understanding of the discourses of what is appropriate or permissible within a particular context. I also think of regulation enacted by other people when individuals transgress the boundaries of what is appropriate. This can take place either overtly or innocuously. To follow Butler then, a large part of regulation is about being 'regular' (Butler, 2004: 40). And so with hyper-regulation I argue that the importance of 'getting it right' ('being regular' through appropriate articulations) is heightened. Getting it right is about regulation as it requires knowledge of the context, of what is permissible, and ensuring that what is articulated is appropriate (and thus *not* articulating something inappropriate for the context). I argue that self-censorship is common at high school and can be seen when people select what they say they like and dislike. I make the claim that school is a hyper-regulatory space based on a number of conversations recorded in the focus groups. Many of the participants felt that they were constrained in what tastes they could articulate at school,³³ with discourses of what may or may not be appropriate having a regulatory impact. The participants compared this to how they imagined adulthood to be, which was discussed as being less restrictive.³⁴ On the whole, participants imagined that during adulthood the

³³ It is possible that through after-school clubs and the presence of peers on social media sites this hyper-regulation may extend beyond parameters of the school walls. As my interest is in when taste is made public (articulated) it is my understanding that school is the central site for where this can happen for the majority of young people.

³⁴ It is important to note that this is what the participants think and not my belief. I would argue that adulthood remains a regulatory space in terms of taste cultures, and some spaces may still be hyper-

things that they liked would have less of an impact on their day to day experiences. There were two logics that framed this thinking; the first was that older people 'mature' to be more accepting (of both their own tastes, and those of others). The second logic was that adults aren't 'trapped' in a space like school, and thus adults can 'get away from' the people that render their tastes problematic. While discussed more widely, this idea is encapsulated well in a statement made by Pedro at City High:

Pedro: As you get older, you get your own interests, and you're not afraid to have your own thing, like, when you're younger you sort of go with the flow a bit more, you just want to fit in and stuff

(City High, Group One, Session One)

When young people imagine adulthood they therefore see it as a space that is free from regulation in comparison to their own experience within the context of school. This indicates that, comparatively, they don't see their own taste cultures as being as free and as accepting. For example, Phoebe commented that "*you get more independence when you're older*"³⁵ (City High, Group Two, Session Three), which I understood to mean that you can display a much freer range of tastes. In addition to gaining more independence, Erica said that "*you sort of get more confidence as you get older*" (City High, Group One, Session One). This suggests that confidence is not something that she feels at present. These comments show that confidence in their tastes and the independence to articulate them are not feelings they currently experience. I argue that this is because school plays a central role in their cultural lives and school is a hyper-regulatory space. Adulthood is therefore understood by these participants as offering the potential to retreat from the pressures regulatory, but it is nevertheless significant that participants made this distinction and imagine adulthood as less restrictive.

³⁵ All in-text quotes from participants are italicised. This is to clearly distinguish the participants' voices from both my own and from the academic's quotes I use. In cases of emphasis in talk, these words are presented without italics.

they experience as school. For example, Pedro said that “*when you’re older, like, you can sort of get away from most people that would be judgemental and stuff, but say, you’re always in their lessons*” (City High, Group One, Session One). Pedro’s comment shows that young people feel that it is not easy to get away from their peers, something that he did not imagine to be a problem that adults face. This further demonstrates the hyper-regulation of school as regulation (either physical or imaginary) is ever-present. Finding that school is hyper-regulatory is significant as it shows why we should be examining youth taste cultures. We should be examining them because young people express feeling restricted in the tastes they can articulate, which raises questions about the grounds on which articulations may be problematised. I argue that one of the outcomes of these processes is the discursive (re)production of gender, which is the focus of Section Three.

The need to ‘fit in’ means that these young people feel that their tastes are regulated, either being deemed appropriate or not. This follows Miles, Cliff and Burr (1998), who found that particular consumption choices allowed young people to feel that they fit in with their peers, with consumer goods providing “resources by which such acceptability can be achieved” (1998: 93). I argue that you don’t even need to *buy* the goods in many cases, and thus aligning yourself with a text by articulating a preference for it serves a very similar purpose. However, we can only make sense of the motivation to fit in and to align with gender appropriate texts when we consider the consequences of *not* fitting in. Participants across the focus groups offered a range of examples for why it’s bad to display inappropriate taste, and how different forms of regulation occur.

5.2 The Consequences of Inappropriate Articulations

For those at City High, being bullied was seen as a direct consequence of inappropriate tastes. Meanwhile, participants at Outskirts High used the word ‘shunned’ to describe the consequence. In this thesis I will use the word shunned as it usefully captures the processes

of exclusion that are described by the participants, while also being a word that young people used. 'Shunned' also recognises the social consequences of transgression without the *intent* for harm that is implied through use of the word 'bullying' (Smith, Madsen and Moody: 1999: 268). The focus of this section is therefore on what happens if an inappropriate taste is articulated, and how knowing this can help us to make sense of why many young people are motivated to articulate 'appropriate' taste.

Group Two at City High in particular discussed that bullying played a role in the experiences of young people and their reasons for wanting to fit in. They also described how, if one was already bullied, one would need to be very careful with what one demonstrates judgements towards. This is because if it was rendered inappropriate then one would be likely to find the bullying exacerbated. At Outskirts High, Anna used the word 'shunned' to describe someone who had been popular, but had since been shunned as a result of something they said. Shunned is therefore (potentially) different to bullied because shunned suggests a collective social rejection of someone who had once 'fit in'. It seemed to me in the discussions that being shunned was a public rejection of an individual that could be playfully or seriously enforced, and in the case of the former, would be likely to be temporary rather than permanent. Whether playful, serious, temporary or permanent, being shunned was a collective process that I argue highlights the importance of appropriateness to all in the community (and in doing so (re)produces dominant discourses). The consequences of failing to adhere to the discourses of appropriate taste can therefore lead to a collective form of social rejection and symbolic exclusion. When I asked those at Outskirts High to talk about *how* this exclusion is enacted, participants identified a range of techniques:

Eliza: shout, scream, laugh, giggle, make up names

Anna: push around, shove

Chloe: get stereotyped

Eliza: yeah and tell their friends, spread that they like a certain thing

Katherine: yeah, spreading it that's like the biggest thing probably
Anna: that is the worst
Eliza: yeah, spreading it
(Outskirts High, Session Two)

Thus, while instances of physical violence were mentioned as a regulatory force, the overwhelming forms of rejection were symbolic. In this discussion they said that 'spreading it' was the biggest thing that could result from an inappropriate taste articulation.

Spreading it involves gossiping across the cohort so that everyone is made aware of the individual's tastes. It's important to note that while these practices are described as some of the outcomes of inappropriate taste, I am cautious not to suggest that these are *automatic* outcomes, and that context is very important. As I explore later, there are times when otherwise inappropriate tastes could be read as appropriate, or at the very least not problematic. Nevertheless, the *potential* for these outcomes (for a young person in a space like a high school) is good motivation to articulate appropriate taste. I asked participants to elaborate on whether spreading it is different for boys or girls (because boys have often been associated with forms of physical violence (Frost, Phoenix and Pattman, 2002) and verbal forms of abuse have been associated with girls (Guendouzi, 2000), I was somewhat surprised to hear that it was more prevalent amongst boys than girls.

Interviewer: is that for boys or girls?

Anna: both

Eliza: I'd say more boys than girls

Katherine: yeah I'd say more boys than girls but both

Eliza: when it comes to TV programmes boys spread it more than girls

Katherine: yeah, like, oh my god so and so watches this

Chloe: and then they link it to things to make it worse like, yeah

Katherine: it's like a Chinese whisper it gets worse and worse as it goes down the line like
(Outskirts High, Session Two)

This conversation also reveals that as part of spreading it, the story is linked to other things to make it worse (Chloe), which shows that a series of inappropriate tastes may be linked

together. When I said above that spreading it might not be an automatic outcome of inappropriate taste, it may be the case that *one* inappropriate articulation could go unpunished, but a second would likely not. This example also reminds us of the important role that the school plays in providing a space where these discourses are (re)produced. As I discuss below, the participants are somewhat reflexive about how arbitrary these discourses of appropriateness are, but they nevertheless acknowledge their importance and (re)produce them. This reminds us of the importance of this research as it is in the hyper-regulated period of youth that the anxieties of performing appropriate taste are heightened, having a considerable impact on how young people (re)present themselves and how they respond to the tastes of others.

What I have argued thus far in this chapter is that young people live within a hyper-regulated space where not being shunned is motivation for articulating appropriate taste. However, this tells us little about the wider context of youth culture, and this is important if I am to capture the complexities of youth when interrogating taste.

5.3 Fitting into What?

I have argued that fitting in is important to young people, but it is thus far not clear what it is that young people are wishing to fit. In this section I show that the young people I spoke to were not necessarily interested in being 'cool' and climbing up some kind of social ladder in a way that we might expect, and instead discussed just wanting to be 'accepted'. On the whole participants were suspicious of the 'cool kids'. This is important for thinking about taste cultures as the absence of an aspirational hierarchy distinguishes the context of contemporary youth culture with Bourdieu's field. Instead, participants discussed just wanting to fit in with their peers and operate without fear of being 'shunned'.

Although there was a general acceptance in the focus groups that they didn't want to be shunned, participants were nevertheless uneasy about *wanting* to appear 'cool'. I believe that this can be partly connected to Thornton's claim that "[n]othing depletes capital more than someone trying to hard" (1995: 12). While there were a number of disparaging comments made about those that had been shunned and were thus excluded from fitting in, a fair number of disparaging comments were also made about those that were recognised as being 'cool'. The most common criticism was that cool people were 'sheep' that 'followed trends', words that were notably mentioned in all of the groups. Interestingly, at Girls High there was a comment made about cool people within their context "*the cool group's sort of like the sporty sort of people*" (Session Two), but more often than not they imagined that those at state schools were more cool than them.³⁶ Further to this, in a different group Lauren spoke of difficulty in talking about what was 'cool' and what was 'good', saying "*yeah, I dunno, coz what's cool is what other people think is good, and then what's good is what I think is good*" (Group Two, Session Three). This complicates our idea of taste because Lauren draws a distinction between what she understands to be the dominant tastes and her own tastes. However, in my observations Lauren's tastes were rarely troubling in terms of gender. I therefore understand 'the cool' to operate differently to appropriateness. Something could be cool and gender appropriate, but something gender appropriate need not be cool, this is because I argue that cool is connected to a hierarchy whereas appropriateness is about fitting in.

The idea that 'cool' operates differently to appropriateness was evident in a number of conversations, and making assumptions about what can or should be considered cool within contemporary youth culture is perilous ground as "*what's cool changes really*

³⁶ This is one of the few times that participants at Girls High (a private school) explicitly distinguished themselves from their state-educated peers. It is also interesting that they did so in discussions about 'cool' as this raises questions of working-class 'authenticity' in relation to coolness (see Skeggs, 2004b).

*quickly*³⁷ (Anna, Outskirts High, Session One). When we consider this in relation to gender and appropriateness I argue that we *could* make tentative assumptions on what could be considered gender appropriate. This is due to the discursive gendering of both audiences and cultural texts. Given the persistence of gender as a category I argue that what's *gendered* does not change that quickly, which is something discussed in the following chapters. This means that in terms of my research questions it is not useful to explore issues of popularity and coolness as these are separate from the issue of gender (in)appropriateness, which is the focus of this thesis. Finding out how gender is (re)produced through taste articulations can be found in the conversations where participants discussed the ways in which they try to keep from being shunned. These conversations reveal to us how gender is (re)produced as they show how young people use their knowledge of the context to make sure they articulate appropriately.

5.4 Strategies of 'Fitting In'

A range of strategies and responses to fitting in were discussed by participants. As I have argued above, coolness is not necessarily connected to gender appropriateness, and this means that fitting in should not be confused with 'trying to be cool'. Ultimately aspirations to be cool were not really discussed by participants and instead they discussed not wanting to be shunned and ostracised by the community for their tastes. Through this process, I argue that gender is discursively (re)produced. I argue in this section that the person that makes a cultural judgement matters, as does who is reading and responding to the articulation. These factors are crucial components of understanding the context of taste articulation as context plays a role in whether or not a taste is rendered gender (in)appropriate.

³⁷ This follows Bennett et al. who wrote that we should "not assume that the same cultural forms will retain their value forever" (2009: 245). See also Miles, Cliff and Burr (1998); Pedrozo (2011).

The person that is making the articulation matters. This is because if they were a long established member of the community with a precedent for making appropriate articulations of taste, then they would be less likely to be shunned on the grounds of an odd or one-off inappropriate articulation. However, if someone was new at school and thus had no precedent of appropriate taste then it would be much more likely that they would find their tastes problematised and be shunned by their peers. This is exemplified by Eliza who said that if one was new at school “*you’d then never be in to be pushed out*” (Outskirts High, Session Two). This also demonstrates that ‘pushing out’ (or shunning) on the grounds of taste is a very real consequence in the lives of young people. One of the reasons we can understand taste as being trickier for those new at school is because they are not likely to be familiar with the specific context and the audience(s) of their taste articulations (and vice versa). While there may be wider discourses of gender appropriateness, how they are played out may vary in context to context. This reveals the importance of context and this is something that was discussed by a number of focus group participants.

Focus group discussions revealed that context was by far the most important factor in terms of how young people negotiated fitting in. This is because different contexts would involve different audiences, and different audiences have different relationships with the individual. When discussing the importance of knowing your context when it comes to articulating taste, participants such as Pedro said, “*yeah, depends who you’re with, you might say different things to different people*” (City High, Group One, Session Three). This demonstrates the ways in which individuals regulate themselves, being careful in what they choose to articulate in any given moment. In a different session at City High, Joe discusses context in terms of friendships groups:

Joe: I think it depends what friendship group you’re with [.]

[Erica nods head]

Joe: like if I’m with my close friends, I’ll be honest about the music and the films that I like, but if I’m with people that I just hang around with from time to time, and I’m not that

confident with them, if I say anything, I might be a bit judgemental if we're still in that phase.
(City High, Group One, Session One)

As Joe's comments illustrate, not knowing how someone might respond to a particular taste articulation is grounds for regulating what he might say. It is interesting to note here that Joe says that he would be 'honest' with his close friends and not with those he is less confident around. This shows that he is carefully censoring and editing his taste articulations based on the context he is in, perhaps being 'less honest' in other situations. This logic is continued in other groups, with Lauren and Rachel at City High saying:

Rachel: it depends who you're with like some people I say I do and some people I say I don't, depends on the mood really

Lauren: I don't, if I think the people aren't going to agree with me, I just won't say anything
(City High, Group Two, Session Three)

Here we see further ways in which context plays a role in the regulation of taste articulation. It seems that for the participants, the consequences of making some articulations of taste to those outside of their friendship groups may be too costly.

Friendship is something that is discussed by participants of all genders to be a much more safe space and interestingly I found that both boys and girls found the space of friendship to be equally supportive. I say interestingly because girls friendships have long since been theorised as significant (Morris-Roberts, 2004; Scott, 2003; Hey, 1997), and this finding suggests that boys' friendships are equally close and significant to their lives. In a conversation between participants at City High both boys and girls discussed the safety of friendship groups in the same way:

Interviewer: so when do you get to have an opinion?

Leticia: when you get to know them better

Pedro: when you get friends

Joe: when you feel comfortable with them and you trust them, when, like you can kind of feel like no matter what you say, they'll be alright with it
(City High, Group One, Session Two)

Despite this, girls' friendships were considered to be much closer than those of boys, and this may be because 'feminine' behaviours such as 'caring' and emotional maturity are gender appropriate for girls. For example, at Outskirts High participants discussed the closeness that they see between girls compared to boys:

Interviewer: is it easier for girls or boys to like erm, like things, or admit to liking things?

Anna: I think it's easier for girls to like things

Katherine: yeah coz girls actually have, like, girls have closer friends–

Tom: –I was shunned–

Katherine: –because boys don't really have like, *friends* as such

Chloe: well they have friends but not like the same relationship as

Eliza: it's not the same thing

Katherine: it's not very close, like, it's just a big group

Eliza: it's someone you sit with at lunch and take the mick out of

Katherine: yeah

Chloe: I think girls tell more personal things to their friends than–

Katherine: –yeah girls have like proper friends, I would say girls have more like, *well*, we're bitchier but we have more kind of friends

Eliza: but are we bitchy because we're closer?

Katherine and Chloe: yes

(Outskirts High, Session Two)

This conversation offers us a fascinating insight into how girls perceive their friendship circles and how they operate in relation to taste cultures. Katherine, agreeing with Anna's comment that it's easier for girls to admit liking things, offers the reason for this as being the closeness that girls experience with their friends. This closeness provides a context of acceptability for girls as they suggest, and Tom as a witness attests, is not the case for their male counterparts. In discussing this distinction Katherine clarifies that it's not that boys don't have friends (we know that they do as the previous conversations have attested), but rather they understand there to be a qualitative difference in the *sort* of friendship that boys and girls have with members of their own gender. Here, there is an understanding

that girls are able to 'tell personal things' to each other and are 'closer', creating a communicative openness that the girls understand as being central to the acceptance of their tastes.

However, while these conversations demonstrate that friendship provides a space for acceptance, this is in relation to the wider context of high school which is much less supportive in comparison. And while it is useful to know this, we still do not know how young people learn what is appropriate. This is important as this is a central site in the discursive (re)production of identity. While some of the articulations that young people consider to be inappropriate are drawn from dominant discourses of gender, the gendered value of some texts may not be clear cut.³⁸ In such situations this would require young people to 'think on their feet'. Given the complicated terrain that the identity pages revealed, it is perhaps not surprising that some participants mentioned this need to think on their feet and respond to uncertainty quickly. This draws us back to the work of Goffman, who argues that actors need to draw upon the 'accredited values of the society' in order for the performance to identity to be accepted (1971: 45).

When discussing this challenge, participants discussed the importance of knowing what had happened previously in similar contexts as a means of regulating their taste articulations. Doing so helped them to minimise their chances of being shunned on the grounds of inappropriate taste. One of the ways of doing this would be to let somebody else make the articulation first, and then see what happens. This is discussed by Mary:

Mary: I was gonna say that, erm, I was gonna say that once one person's sorta opened up, oh I'd I really wanna go see that, I think everyone else sort of thinks that, not that copying, but they sort of have that in the back of their mind as well but they don't want to open up [...]

Rachel: like on Mary's point as well, people might not feel as though they *can* say it because they're not sure like who else is going to feel the same way, but like if everyone is

³⁸ Gendered value is the subject of discussion in Chapter Seven and Chapter Eight.

going to disagree with them or like tease them about it, but if one person does it, then it might make them feel a bit more like reassured to then do it and know that they're not going to get bullied for it
(City High, Group Two, Session Three)

Other strategies included asking those that you are with what they like and then responding accordingly:

Flora: If I was new at school I wouldn't say that I'd watched anything

Interviewer: you wouldn't say anything?

Reuben: just wait until they say that they like something [.]

Erica: yeah—

Reuben: —and then say ooh yeah I watch that! And then you'd automatically get to [waves hand to gesture 'in']

(City High, Group One, Session Three)

This approach allows the individual to ensure that they will not be shunned for their tastes as they would be following the precedent set by another group member. Another approach discussed was to use a prompt to start a discussion about a particular text as a means of gauging a response. For example, Sara suggested that “*conversations would probably start by seeing an advert somewhere on a bus or a TV*” (City High, Group Two, Session Three). By doing this, the individual has a means of neutrally introducing the text in conversation and finding its value before making a public expression of judgement about it. These strategies highlight the reflexivity of taste articulations in youth culture, where young people regulate their articulations directly on the basis of what is understood as appropriate.

In other groups and especially in the second group at City High, participants were keen to stress their own independence and agency their taste articulations. As discussed above, those that blindly follow the rules (using some of the aforementioned regulatory practices) were described as ‘sheep’. A few participants in Group Two instead spoke of how they were not interested in ‘fitting in’ and thus discussed their tastes in ways that could

demonstrate the transgression of dominant discourses.³⁹ For example, Naomi (whose tastes were different to others) continuously asserted that she would not lie to fit in.

Phoebe: yeah I'd say what I liked, like what I actually like

Naomi: I wouldn't lie just to fit in
(City High, Group Two, Session Three)

However, what is important to note about Phoebe and Naomi is that they were not shunned in the group. This is because they had precedents that allowed them to make these transgressions while ultimately not troubling the wider discourses. This is also largely because, as I discuss in Chapter Eight, girls have much more freedom in the tastes they can articulate than boys, and this is a result of the lower status of femininity and girls' culture. Additionally, although some participants indicated that they may have transgressed when emphasising their own agency, it was rare that I saw the dominant discourses be troubled (these will be explored in relation to gender in Section Three). This nevertheless exemplifies the role of regulation in contemporary youth taste cultures, as having to assert that you don't follow the dominant discourses nevertheless exemplifies the existence and prevalence of the dominant discourses in the first place.

5.5 Concluding Remarks

In this chapter I have demonstrated that youth taste cultures are regulatory and elucidated why young people have a motivation to articulate appropriate taste(s). I have argued that high school is experienced as a hyper-regulatory space by young people. The hyper-regulation of high school means that young people feel pressure to fit in, and this pressure comes from the environment of high-school where young people find themselves in each other's pockets. As a result of this, participants in the focus groups discussed how they felt

³⁹ This can also be seen on Figure 8 (p.120) where the participant wrote on the worksheet '*but personally more confident people won't change their life to suit others*'.

restricted in what they could say that they like for fear of social repercussions that would negatively impact their day-to-day experiences. One of these repercussions was to be 'shunned'; I have used the word shunned (which was used by participants at Outskirts High) as it usefully captures social exclusion during youth. Being shunned may be an outcome of inappropriate taste, and knowledge that shunning can happen is regulatory. This is because none of the participants that I spoke to wanted to be shunned and this is understandable as they occupy the same spaces daily and thus exclusion would be unlikely to be a positive experience for them. The desire to not be shunned in a hyper-regulatory space therefore helps us to understand the motivation for articulating appropriate taste.

When it comes to what appropriate taste is, and how it can be learned, I have distinguished what is 'appropriate' from what is 'cool'. I have done so as what is 'cool' changes very quickly and while may be connected to gender in some ways, gender appropriateness operates on a different level. This is because gender is discursively inscribed into texts and audiences outside of what may or may not be cool. I have argued that something may be uncool but nevertheless gender appropriate and the nuances of this is the subject of exploration in Section Three.

I have argued that context is key to understanding what articulations can be appropriately made. This is because there are some moments where articulation is 'safer' than others, as well as moments where the outcome of a particular articulation is unknown. I have shown that if someone has set a precedent for having appropriate tastes then the odd taste that is inappropriate is unlikely to lead to them being shunned. However, if someone is new to the school then inappropriate tastes may have a bigger impact on their position within the group. Participants discussed that if they were new, or in uncertain situations then they would need to 'test the water' before making an articulation of taste. We can therefore see that regulation on the grounds of taste is widely experienced,

demonstrating the importance of exploring the ways in which taste cultures (re)produce identities during youth.

In this chapter I have argued *why* young people's taste cultures matter, and *how* and *why* it is that young people (re)produce the dominant discourses. The focus of the remainder of this thesis is on gender as the (re)produced identity. I place this focus on this particular identity due to the continued and persistent inequalities that exist at the level of gender. Before I look specifically at taste and gender appropriateness I provide an outline of what participants understand gender to be. This gives a useful basis for understanding their discussions of gender appropriate taste articulation. By having an understanding of how young people make sense of and attribute gender we can begin to appreciate the complexity of gender as a category within contemporary youth culture. This is because if young people have a very biologically deterministic account of gender then this would likely impact on how gender is inscribed into cultural texts and tastes, compared to if they hold a queer account of gender. In the following chapter I show that while progressive in some aspects, gender is ultimately conceived of in the binary, which helps us to understand how and why gender inappropriate taste matters, which is the subject of the chapters that follow it.

Chapter Six

'I needed a gay': Participants' Understanding of Gender

This chapter lays the foundation for the empirical analyses that follow. It does so by outlining what participants understand gender to mean and be, allowing us to see the significance of analysing youth taste cultures as a site of the discursive (re)production of gender. By drawing on the focus group discussions, this chapter reveals that although participants often made a distinction between sex and gender, they often reiterated the 'discoverability' of gender in terms of biology. This is important because if young people believe that there *is* a discoverable gender, then this would suggest that there could be such a thing as gender appropriate taste. Ensuring that your tastes are coherent with the gender that you present as⁴⁰ is important in ensuring that you are not shunned in the hyper-regulatory context of school. To elucidate this I examine the conversations that young people had about the identity page respondent that identified themselves as an 'inbetweenener'. Through these discussions awareness and possibility for genders that trouble the binary are revealed, as well as their consequences. This troubling was usually (re)interpreted through dominant discourses, where 'regular' accounts of the gender binary were (re)produced.

I have argued in Chapter One that I approach gender from a poststructuralist perspective. This means that I do not believe in a fixed gender, and that instead gender is achieved iteratively. Given that queer theory is a more radical position that exists

⁴⁰ When I use the term 'present as' I am referring to the gender identity that is being communicated to the audience, unless a queer presentation is given (which was not the case in any of the focus group) I believe that gender is attributed on the basis of this presentation. I want to move away from biologically deterministic accounts of gender not least because "[a]ttributions are almost always made in the absence of information about genitals" (Kessler and McKenna, 1978: 17) and that following Butler (1990) what these genitals mean are socially constructed anyway.

predominantly in the domain of academia rather than 'real life' it is not surprising that focus group participants did not discuss gender in the same way that I do. I instead found that while many participants were keen to appear progressive in their discussion of gender and offering deconstructions, binary accounts were nevertheless (re)produced. As mentioned in the analysis of the identity pages, two of the respondents from this stage of data collection described their gender outside of the binary. These responses came from respondent 130, who described their gender as 'inbetween' and respondent 146, who described their gender as "i'm confused i have both". These responses show that in this context gender is experienced outside of the binary at least for a few young people. This reinforces the need to see how the gender binary is (re)produced as this is likely to have the biggest impact on those that experience gender outside of it.

In the focus groups almost some of the participants gave accounts of gender that found space for young people to perform versions of gender that may not fit 'conventional' gender. However, in almost all of these accounts it was suggested that *ultimately* 'underneath' a person's performance one is either male *or* female, never both nor neither. This demonstrates that their accounts of gender were somewhat limited and that they were nevertheless invested in the gender binary. Of the conversations that I observed there was a sense that gender fluidity was something that *could* exist, but was rarely something that the participants had actually experienced. In many cases flippant comments reinforced discourses of gender appropriateness. What this chapter therefore illustrates is that despite being a social group where "identity and status are questioned, suspended or reversed" (Hesmondhalgh, 2005: 37), I found that young people overwhelmingly (re)produced the dominant discourses rather than transgressing them when it comes to gender. I give specific attention to the ways in which gender is discursively (re)produced through appropriate taste in the following chapters, thus the purpose of this chapter is to

outline how young people think of gender in order for us to know the context in which this (re)production is occurring.

Existing work has started to reveal the complexities of gender in youth (Driver, 2008). It is my contention that by examining how young people understand gender, then the complexity of gender in youth can be illuminated. This is because in youth cultures young people negotiate what it means to be young, gendered, and not shunned in their being so. Gender is complex at the best of times, and I found that participants often struggled to communicate their ideas about it. Before I discuss how gender was specifically understood by participants, I'd first like to turn to a conversation that revealed that being in Norfolk was seen as integral to the participants' development of beliefs and ideas.

6.1 Gender in Norfolk

For participants at Outskirts High, being in Norfolk was discussed as playing a role in how they understood gender. This is significant as it shows the importance of the wider-context when it comes to youth and gender and reminds us to reflect on the geographies of the young people we investigate. In this conversation I found that participants imagined that their peers in bigger cities such as London would be more progressive in their approach to gender, especially in terms of accepting more fluid gender identities. This is exemplified by Eliza who said that *"they're more accepting [in London]. I don't think it would be as bad as what it is here, because we're so like, secluded"* (Outskirts High, Session One). This suggests that in Norfolk the gender binary may play more of a role in the everyday experiences of young people in the region, being what Eliza describes as 'bad'. Participants at Outskirts High also believed that sexual education would be 'better' in more urban areas. I found this interesting because it was at Outskirts High that I experienced considerable knowledge of alternative gender identities due to a recent Personal Development lesson they had on trans gender identities.

The analysis that I offer below is primarily of some of the final focus group discussions that were held, where participants undertook the 'Matching-Up Exercise' (outlined in Chapter Three). In this exercise participants 'matched-up' the prompts and the respondents gender descriptors based on the tastes articulated on the prompts. Of these gender descriptors, the term 'inbetweener' was used; this encouraged the participants to reflect on how they understood gender in relation to the binary.

6.2 Inbetweener

Inbetweener was a gender descriptor used by the person that wrote prompt three (respondent 130) and attended Boundary High (which was not the site of any of the focus groups). As I discussed in the methodology chapter I had purposely included this prompt as it ensured the inclusion of a non-binary gender identity. The participants were not told of the gender-descriptors given until they were involved in the 'Matching-Up Exercise'. As I discuss below, a result of the inclusion of the 'inbetweener' prompt was the discussion about gender beyond the binary. It is therefore very important to note that prior to the matching up exercise *none* of the participants from the focus groups used the word 'inbetweener', nor did they imagine any of the prompt-writers in terms that were outside of the gender binary (although 'gender confused' was mentioned in one of the sessions). This is significant as it demonstrates that participants did not think of gender outside of the binary until they were prompted to do so. This further indicates the prevalence of the gender binary within contemporary youth culture.

I found that when participants discussed non-binary gender identities they tended to conflate gender identity with sexual orientation. This was particularly pronounced with boys and/or masculinity and is significant as it can help explain boys' motivation to articulate gender appropriate taste within a homohysterical context (as discussed in Chapter One). For example, at Girls High, Melark talks about one of the prompt writers as: "*it's*

either a girl or gay" (Session One). Melark was not 'corrected' and told that gay is not a gender, which is a departure from what I observed in the other groups when similar comments were made. For example, when discussing the potential genders of prompt-writers the group said:

Phoebe: I didn't think inbetween was good, I needed a gay one

Interviewer: What's the difference? How does gay?

Phoebe: Well because if you're gay you're not–

Sara: –it's not a gender is it!

[Rachel and Juan laugh]

Phoebe: [laughing] No I'm not saying that but like, if they're inbetween they probably think like, oh I dunno [puts head into arms that are folded up on the desk and then raises her head again] erm, I dunno I just needed that
(City High, Group Two, Session Four)

In this conversation we see that for Phoebe, the term 'gay' would better conceptualise a transgressive gender identity. However, this is picked up by Sara (who, we see below, is critical of conventional conceptions of gender), who jests that gay is not a gender. The playful manner in which Sara does this is less threatening than a stern 'telling off' but nevertheless informs Phoebe that she is wrong. However, what we see here is Phoebe struggling to articulate her own understandings of gender. So, by understanding some gender practices as *gay* gender practices, we can come to understand how this may be problematic for young people (especially boys) in a homohysterical context. Additionally, it was almost always the word 'gay' that was conflated with a gender identity and not 'lesbian' (or other sexual orientations). In the instances where participants (Mary and Phoebe) discussed having been called a lesbian it was often as an insult, but not directly conflated with a gender identity as was with the word gay. When participants discussed this distinction they described how the word gay was more harmful (and thus, I argue, regulatory), for boys than the word lesbian was for girls. For example on two occasions Sara said, "*it doesn't affect girls as much*" (City High, Group Two, Session One). Of course I am keen to stress that this is what participants described as being the case, and does not take

into account the lived realities, stresses and challenges faced by those labelled a 'lesbian' in a heteronormative context.⁴¹

I argue that this conflation between gender and sexuality matters because it demonstrates young people's difficulties in thinking of gender outside of the binary. If young people conflate gender inappropriate taste with a minority sexuality then this is problematic for the individual within a heteronormative context. Thus, there is a motivation for young people, especially boys, to articulate tastes that are coherent with the gender that they present as.

6.3 The Sex/Gender Distinction

The inbetween prompt was useful in eliciting conversations about the potential for gender outside of the binary. However, a conflation with gender was not the only finding to emerge from these discussions. In this section I show the ways in which participants grappled with the distinctions between sex and gender.

It was refreshing to find that many of the participants did not employ biologically deterministic accounts of gender in their discussions. For example, Erica made a distinction between sex and gender saying "*well biologically they are like a boy or a girl but gender is kind of fluid I think, like depending on how you see yourself, I dunno*" (City High, Group One, Session Four). While Erica is certainly not confident or certain, the distinction she makes between the two is clear. This indicates that young people like Erica could understand gender to be an arbitrary category. However, although these sorts of distinctions were made, there was emphasis placed on the binary core of gender. This makes the idea that the "ontological security ascribed to sex and gender allows them to operate as seemingly

⁴¹ This connects to Nayak and Kehily who found that the term lesbian was used "by young men as a vernacular form of abuse" (2008: 162) against girls. However, they also found that these girls would often 'overturn the sign value' of such insults by enacting forms of lesbianism (2008: 162).

stable points of reference in an increasingly insecure world” (Nayak and Kehily, 2008: 198) a persuasive one in light of the findings that I present here. For example, at Outskirts High Troy can be seen negotiating the complex cultural/biological framing of gender, saying “*it depends, gender is just male and female like X and Y chromosomes, but if you want to get into it then you’ve got like the weird stuff like transsexual, asexual, pansexual, that depends who you’re going into*” (Session Three). This shows that although Troy acknowledges alternative genders and demonstrates knowledge of them (although some conflation with sexuality is made); the extent to which gender is troubled is limited by his comment ‘the weird stuff’, which renders non-binary gender identities as problematic. This helps us to understand how non-binary genders are discursively Othered. However, I found an alternative position offered by Sara at City High, who did not trouble gender in her own articulations, but often deconstructed cisnormativity. However, Sara nevertheless focused on biology as the way of ‘knowing’ gender. For example, in Session Two she challenged Naomi’s assumption that Gwyneth Paltrow is an actress and not an actor in the following exchange:

Sara: she might just be feminine, coz, you’ve *seen* her?

Naomi: not seen her like that! *God!*

Sara: how do you know she’s a girl then?

Phoebe: just, Sara, give it up!

(City High, Group Two, Session Two)

Meanwhile in Session Four, when Lauren expressed that she wasn’t sure how she would describe her gender, Sara responded by saying “*I’m going to put this as polite as I can, you have a vagina don’t you? [group laughter] Then you’re a woman!*” (City High, Group Two, Session Four). In both of these instances we see that Sara uses biologically rooted understandings of what it means to be a woman (‘do you have a vagina?’). This was mirrored in the final session at Outskirts High when Troy explained that “*for all intents and purposes, they think that they’re a woman but they don’t have ladyparts*”. In this instance,

like Sara's conceptualisation of gender, 'ladyparts' is seen as an integral component to 'actually' being a woman. This shows that even in the case of the more progressive participants, there was a fixation on biology as the deciding factor when it comes to gender attribution. This means that young people understand that there *is* a fixed gender to which they can measure the appropriateness of taste(s) against. This is because the young people that I spoke understood gender as ultimately defined by biology (which is binary) and thus this is how attributions are made.

I found that participants generally believed that an individual is either male *or* female, and that this should be evident and attributable in interaction. This further limits the extent to which we can understand gender to be a troubled category within youth despite knowledge of gender beyond the binary being evident. For example, when discussing the inbetweeners, Leticia commented "*but surely you'd know if it was a boy or a girl if you were talking to them*" (City High, Group One, Session Four). Further to this Lauren emphasised the desire to know the 'actual' gender of the respondent, which further indicates that there is desire for gender to be a stable and attributable element of one's identity. Both of these comments also show that they see gender to be a 'fact' of someone's identity that can and should be attributable, highlighting the "unending desire to know the truth of sex categories" (Nayak and Kehily, 2008: 166). This is important for us to know because it shows that young people see gender as a binary in terms of biology, and because they expect to 'discover' this through interaction, articulations of taste can be a way of either affirming or troubling the gender identity that one presents or is read as. The potential for shunning or mockery that is experienced in the hyper-regulatory space of high school therefore helps us to understand why there may be motivation to articulate tastes that are coherent with the gender attributed and thus 'fit in'. Gender therefore matters, and this was discussed by Pedro and Flora:

Pedro: coz if it was a boy they'd want to be, they don't want to, portray themselves as feminine

Flora: it's alright for a girl to be tomboyish but not so much for a boy to be like a girl
(City High, Group One, Session Four)

The specificities of the gendered aspect of this quote are issues to which I return in the following chapter when exploring masculinities. Nevertheless, this quote does show us that the ways in which gender is presented matters, as discourses of gender appropriateness regulate (articulating in a way that matches the gender you are attributed and present as). For example, for boys Pedro and Flora show that it would be problematic to be attributed as male but 'portray as feminine'. The problematisation of a person's performance of gender identity was also demonstrated by Troy (someone that was shown above to have knowledge of non-binary genders), who said the following the discussion about the inbetweeners: "*I still can't believe someone actually thought that would be a good idea*" (Outskirts High, Session Three). This shows that Troy did not think that it was a good idea, and the disparaging tone of his comment further suggested that this articulation of gender was problematic. In making this comment, Troy also made his judgement known to everybody else that heard it, reminding them of the parameters of acceptable gender.

Meanwhile, in Group One at City High, discussions of biological sex and gender expression showed the complexities of the lived realities of transgressive gender in a space such as a school. This is because many of these participants had a shared experience of encountering someone whose presentation of gender did not follow the discursively dominant binary. This discussion was distinct from the comments made by Troy, as rather than disparaging when speaking about the individual they did so respectfully but with confusion. Here the boys were uncertain of the individual's gender, with Reuben noting that "*on the register it was a girl's name, but he liked to be called a boy's name*" (City High, Group One, Session Four). In the general tone of the conversation and through the use of male pronouns the group showed considerable acceptance of the individual's gender

expression. However, it was also revealed that the group more widely struggled with this presentation of gender, as gender could not be attributed with certainty. Pedro explained that the person has '*gone*' now, emphasising the word gone. This indicates that their presentation of gender was not able to be maintained in the hyper-regulatory space of school, and as Pedro emphasised the word '*gone*' he reminds all of those around him that this is the outcome of problematic gender performances.

6.4 Concluding Remarks

In this chapter I have showed that gender is not understood to be a straightforward category by the young people that I spoke to. The focus groups have nevertheless revealed that young people see gender as a binary, emphasising the knowability of gender once in the presence of someone. However, gender expression was discussed in a less fixed way, with some participants discussing more transgressive accounts. In these accounts fluidity was discussed, and this indicated a somewhat progressive approach to gender whereby gender expression needn't 'match' the gender they are attributed.

However, the discussions revealed that although participants believed that gender expression need not 'fit' the attributed gender of an individual, there were motivations to ensure that it did. For example, Group One at City High discussed how a participant whose gender expression confused them ended up having to leave the school. Meanwhile I observed Troy questioning why someone would think it a 'good idea' to describe their gender as 'inbetween'. These instances, coupled with the conflation between gender and sexuality in terms of transgression (feminine boys are gay, for example), demonstrate that failure to perform gender appropriateness is likely to lead to what the previous chapter has described as 'shunning'. It is therefore useful to contextualise the findings discussed in this chapter with those of the previous chapter, as they help to elucidate how gender appropriate taste is regulative within contemporary youth cultures. For example, in the

previous chapter I argued that school is a hyper-regulatory space, where inappropriate taste can lead to the shunning of individuals and/or the problematisation of their identity. If we think about this in terms of gender and how young people understand it, which this chapter has focused on, then we can assume that gender would be subject to the same scrutiny in terms of appropriateness. This is because gender transgressions are described as having been problematised, leading to the exclusion of some young people from school itself. I therefore argue that school is hyper-regulatory and there is an expectation that the gender that one is attributed will match one's articulations. It is thus the subject of the following chapter to see how gender and taste are worked out in relation to appropriateness. In doing so I illuminate the ways in which gender is (re)produced within youth taste cultures. I show the different ways in which texts are inscribed with gendered value and through this how and why particular judgements that are made about them matter. I show that the gender of the person making the expression is important in terms of how the judgement is understood by the wider collective. I argue that taste matters because expressions of taste (re)produce gender, and an understanding of gender appropriate taste regulates what is permissible to express in the hyper-regulatory school context.

**Section Three: The (Re)Production of
Gender in Contemporary Youth Taste
Cultures**

Introduction to Section Three

How do young people (re)produce gender and what role does taste play in this process?

These are the underlying questions posed in this thesis. The previous chapter has shown that gender is a somewhat stable category for young people. For the participants, gender is understood in relation to (but not defined by) the sexed body which they see as a binary. However, my approach is one that sees gender *beyond* the body, understanding it as discursively (re)produced. My interest is specifically in how these discourses of gender are (re)produced within taste articulations. This makes asking questions about how gender is (re)produced difficult. It is difficult because if we accept that the body does not make gender but rather discourse does, then we are nevertheless left with the challenge of categorising different behaviours/tastes/texts as gendered. This is problematic as through categorisation we run the risk of “stereotyping and/or reify[ing] gender binaries” (Francis, 2010: 478). I have responded to this issue by conceiving of gender as something that is inscribed by people in relation to the masculine and the feminine, which is associated with the behaviours of boys and girls. I work on the basis that gender is something that young people inscribe on the understanding that (for them) there *is* a gender binary and that gendered stereotypes (and/or expectations) help them to make sense of this (even if they do not always agree with the stereotypes as we will see). I am not arguing that these inscriptions are inherent or ‘natural’, but rather aim to deconstruct them so that we can better understand how gender is (re)produced. This is important because if we can learn how young people (re)produce gender then we can learn how to best intervene, because in the (re)production of gender, the possibilities of who and what young people can be remain limited. Thus, while we might want to abandon these stereotypes as they are both problematic and arbitrary, they are nevertheless discursively powerful and we should acknowledge this as they play an important cultural role in the lives of young people.

Given these complexities it is therefore useful for me to describe what I mean when I talk about cultural texts as inscribed with gender. Rather than just seeing a text as being inscribed with gender, I see it as being inscribed with gendered value. Value allows us to think not just about how a text may (re)present versions or aspects of gender (such as representing physicality as masculinity, for example), but the assumption that the texts also offer something to the individual on the grounds of their gendered identity. I understand *all* cultural texts as having the potential to be inscribed with gendered value. Value is used to describe the worth and usefulness of something, and so gendered value is something that is measured on a text's capacity to be meaningful to someone of a particular gender. In almost all instances I rely on participants to tell me what texts have gendered value. This allows young people's experiences and collective understandings to be at the forefront of my analysis. Knowing what texts hold gendered value to them allow us to see what texts may or may not be considered appropriate for someone to like. For example, a text that has high feminine value would likely be considered appropriate for a girl to like, but perhaps not appropriate for a boy to like. In aligning themselves with a text by saying they like it, the gendered value of the text may mean that they are able to perform a particular version of gender based on the discourses of gender.

However, it could be argued that the idea of gendered value rests on an essentialist gender binary, because things are recognised as valuable because they are associated with a particular gender (that presumably exists prior to the process of gendering – masculinity is inherently about maleness and so forth). We *can* accept however that due to the iterative nature of gender there are collective understandings of gendered expectations. A broad understanding of the things boys are expected to 'do' and the things girls are expected to 'do' are temporarily stabilised even if they are arbitrary. Masculinity and femininity can therefore be understood as the 'ideals' of what we have come to expect of those that present as male and those that present as female. Masculinity and femininity

are therefore used as “descriptors for clusters of behaviours or attributes, which will be related to dominant social conceptions of masculinity or femininity” (Paechter, 2007: 13) but can be applied to all genders. It is therefore important to remember that “knowing that someone is male or female says very little about how their masculinity or femininity is constructed” (Paechter, 2006: 261) and so these ‘ideals’ need not be performed by those with the bodies that ‘correspond’ with them. It is thus possible for a girl to perform masculinity, as has been well documented (Francis, 2010; Renold, 2007; Paechter, 2006; Halberstam, 1998) and vice versa (although this has been less well documented). My interest is thus in how expressions of taste are rendered appropriate or inappropriate in terms of gender, and what the consequences might be for gender inappropriate articulation. I believe that to capture this understanding focus on the collective processes of meaning making is required.

I place emphasis on collectivity in this thesis, and through this question how gender is (re)produced on the grounds of collectively understood appropriateness. I agree with Francis who argues that an approach to gender that only focuses on the *reading* of gender “does not acknowledge the aspect of construction of the performer” (Francis, 2008: 220), but as I have argued previously I do not believe that the performer can ever be divorced from the audience.⁴² Thus, analysis of the audience’s reading can nevertheless tell us meaningful things about how particular discourses are collectively (re)produced, and how discourses of gender are (re)produced in both readings and performances. This follows the pivotal work of Kessler and McKenna (1978), who argued that gender is something that is *attributed* to individuals based on an audience’s ‘reading’ of one’s gender. This is of central importance to this final section as it is here that we can see how certain genders are

⁴² This follows my position set out in Chapter One where I drew upon Goffman’s (1971) account of self-presentation and the audiences of performance.

attributed to particular individuals by audiences, and thus how discourses of gender are collectively (re)produced.

I am interested in how taste is discussed in relation to people that have been attributed a gender. This operates at two levels in this research. Participants have been attributed a gender, either by themselves (by making comments like, 'I'm a boy'), or by myself during the process of research. In the case of the latter, this attribution is based on the individual's self-presentation. As I have argued previously, I follow Butler (2006; 1993) and conceive of 'sex' to be as much of a socially-constructed category as 'gender'. I therefore draw on the work of Paechter (2007) in that when I use the term boy or girl (as none of the participants presented ambiguously) I do not make a claim about the person's chromosomal or morphological sex, but rather how they present. To continue in my reference to Paechter's work, I understand the terms boy and girl to be necessarily "neutral as to what a person is like, so that it is possible to have a masculine woman or feminine boy" (2007: 13). How one presents is important, as the previous chapter has demonstrated that when encountering a person, young people assign them a gender based on the binary. In assigning someone a gender a somewhat stable marker is established, against which appropriateness is measured. This follows Francis, who argues that "once a 'gender attribution' has been made (a person understood by others as male or female), the behaviour of the person concerned will be understood by spectators with reference to the gender attribution" (2010: 482). Gender attribution, which "forms the foundation for understanding other components of gender" (Kessler and McKenna, 1978: 2) is therefore central to our understanding of what 'appropriateness' is measured against (see also, Speer, 2005). As the previous chapter has indicated, and Section Three elucidates in greater depth, coherence between the gender attributed and the gender expressed is important. It is of importance because in the hyper-regulatory space of school there are very 'real' consequences for transgression, and as previous research has shown there are greater

consequences for those that present as male (boys) (see Francis, 2009; Epstein and Johnson, 1998), than there are for those that present as female (girls).

In Section Three I work through how taste is rendered appropriate or inappropriate on the grounds of gender. To do this I focus on the participant, thinking about *who* is making the articulation and the gender that they present as, and *how* either their experience or articulation is responded to (or was responded to) by the wider group. I also focus on the grounds on which gender is attributed to the prompt-writer by the participants, analysing the tastes that they draw on to make sense of gender. This helps to grasp how some articulations and/or texts are understood as having gendered value by participants. In addition to this, I also think about how and why gender is inscribed into cultural texts, and how these understandings feed into how they talk about the appropriateness of tastes. I therefore explore gender at two levels, those that present as a gender and what they do (or are expected to do), such as girls and what girls do/like. I also explore the judgements given about texts and how they are gendered too. This also helps to see what gendered value particular texts have within the wider context of contemporary youth taste cultures. For example, I focus on the texts that are inscribed with femininity, thus holding feminine value, thinking about either *who* says they like them, or who participants *expect* to like them and *why* (as well as what the wider value of these texts are). This helps us to think about the multi-faceted ways in which gender is (re)produced in taste cultures.

I conceive of taste as negotiated in relation to these discourses of appropriateness, (re)producing gender in the process. Taste can only be rendered appropriate or inappropriate on the grounds that cultural texts are understood as holding particular gendered values, and part of this requires thinking about how texts are inscribed with gendered value and on what grounds. To do this I focus on the gender inscription that has

been done by the participants, and so when I discuss a text as having gendered value this is only because it has either been directly discussed as such by participants or implied in how they associated it with a particular gendered audience. In terms of masculinity and femininity I understand them as broadly concerned with expectations of what males or females *do*, but of not being essentially connected to 'sexed-bodies'. I therefore posit that there can be such a thing as female masculinity or male femininity. Indeed, I argue that young people hold this understanding too, which is precisely why taste is regulated on the grounds of gender appropriateness.

Section Three is structured in a way that acknowledges the unfixedness of gender, but due to the need to organise these chapters in a way that is coherent, I have been forced to fix gender and gendered expectations onto the page to a certain extent. As a means of achieving this I think about taste that is considered appropriate for 'boys' (that is, individuals that have been attributed a youth male identity) alongside the (re)production of masculinity. This is because by looking at what people of a particular gender are imagined to like we can start to think about the inscription of gender into texts and tastes. I then focus on girls' tastes and how we can think about this in relation to femininity. I find that what is appropriate for girls is much broader than what is appropriate for boys, showing that taste cultures are experienced differently by those that present as girls and those that present as boys. I then ask whether or not we can see any transgressions of gender through taste articulation, showing the highly nuanced ways in which discourses of gender are employed to rein-in potentially problematic tastes. I first focus on appropriate tastes for boys, developing an understanding of what texts hold masculine value and why this is, before thinking about femininity and the very different ways that femininity operates within contemporary youth taste cultures.

Chapter Seven

Appropriate Tastes for Boys and Discourses of Masculinity

In this and in the following section on girls' tastes and femininity, I continue to emphasise the relationality of gender and its unfixedness, but as a means of understanding the complexities of masculinity and femininity and their (re)productions, I do so by looking at them separately. The reasons for this are twofold; in the first instance, both academic theory and focus group participants acknowledge the differences between masculinity and femininity, and thus an exploration of these differences separate from one another will be useful. Although I believe that these differences are arbitrary and discursively (re)produced, they are nevertheless made 'real' within interaction. The second reason for considering masculinity separately from femininity despite its relational nature is because it is useful for us to reflect on young masculinities and their (re)production. This is because the current academic context around masculinities is shifting, as is the cultural context of masculinity within the West more broadly (McCormack, 2012: xxvii).

As I argued in Chapter One, masculinity studies (and simultaneously studies of the lives of boys and men) are at a turning point. I discussed how Connell's (1995) theory of hegemonic masculinity has come under increasing scrutiny in recent years by theories of inclusive masculinity. This chapter contributes to these conversations by challenging the certainty of the hegemonic masculinity model, but equally demonstrates the limits that boys face in their transgressions of masculinity. Within this I show that inclusive masculinity theory does not contain all of the answers either. I reveal that boys are more limited in their expression of gender than some of the research that has explored youth and inclusive masculinity has indicated, and this may be because the boys in this study are younger than

those of the existing studies of youth and inclusive masculinity.⁴³ This shows the importance of considering the diversity of experiences of different age-levels during the period of youth as these younger boys tended to be less inclusive than the existing studies show to be experienced by older boys. This follows Roberts' claim that "youth cultures have always been finely age-graded" (1997: 11). I argue that this is the case because of the hyper-regulation that takes place at high school, where young people try to not be shunned.⁴⁴ These distinctions demonstrate why it is so important for us to engage *directly* with young people in order to make much better sense of the complexities of their gendered lives.

I show that the tastes that are appropriate for boys are much more limited than the tastes that are appropriate for girls. I argue that part of this is as a result of the devaluation of the feminine, which fits with some of the theoretical assumptions of gendered value (see, Paechter, 2006). I also argue that the limits of appropriate tastes for boys are also bound up with the power that it is associated with masculinity and we see this in the texts that are inscribed with masculine value. As part of this we see the usefulness of Connell's (1995) theory of masculinity as it allows us to make sense of the pervasiveness of traditionally masculine stereotypes. However, what I didn't find was the admiration of the hegemonic masculine 'prototypes' (Lusher and Robins, 2009: 396) that I discussed in Chapter One. This was exemplified by the problematisation of the tastes of a prompt-writer that articulated preference for a range of very stereotypically masculine texts. However, just because some of the more stereotypical versions of masculinity were

⁴³ See, for example, Roberts (2013); McCormack (2012); McCormack, (2011a); McCormack (2011b); Anderson and McGuire (2010); McCormack and Anderson (2010); Anderson (2009).

⁴⁴ Although McCormack (2012) describes his participants as 'high school students' he is referring to the American education system (despite conducting his study in England) and his participants were actually aged 16-18 (2012: 13). McCormack's study was therefore with Sixth Form students and thus were out of compulsory education and close to moving permanently out of school

problematized by participants (including boys), this does not mean that I found inclusive masculinity to be in operation.

As I explored in Chapter One, inclusive masculinities have been theorized as operating most pervasively in periods of diminished homophobia, when there is little to no fear of being labelled 'gay' (McCormack, 2012: 44). Although there were few instances of overt homophobia, the conflation of gender and sexuality (as discussed in the previous chapter) and the perceived problem that this would have for the individual (according to the participants), suggests that homophobia is nevertheless a problem within the hyper-regulatory space of high school (or at the very least in the four that I visited). In instances where boys felt that they could be read as gay, articulations of tastes that were high in masculine value offered ways of ensuring that they (re)produced a recognized 'non-gay' version of masculinity. To say therefore that the masculinities and the discussions of masculinities in relation to boys are nuanced would be an understatement. I argue that nevertheless, a coherent version of masculinity was (re)produced and this is what was associated with boys. This follows my poststructuralist approach where I understand masculinities and masculine identities to be "constructed in discourse and used in discourse" (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 842). However, as I show further below, girls also (re)produced these masculinities and some were discussed as having the potential to be appropriate to the taste articulations of girls. This shows the importance of thinking about gender as distinct from the performer. I will also show in Chapter Nine that a version of masculinity was (re)produced when boys distanced themselves from texts that were considered valuable in terms of femininity.

In the analysis of the identity pages in Chapter Four, I showed that youth taste cultures are diverse and varied, and I questioned how young people could find meaning in these diversities. I show in this chapter that discourses of gender *are* present throughout

young people's discussions, and thus despite appearing diverse they are imbued with meaning. I find that judgements of a wide range of cultural texts are given value in relation to gender, and that they thus play a role in gender's (re)production. In the discussion of boys' tastes I found that a number of cultural texts were inscribed with masculine value, and were therefore considered appropriate for boys to like because they were associated with boy audiences. Later in Section Three I think about the texts that are problematic in terms of masculinity, and that are labelled inappropriate for boys to like. In doing so I demonstrate the limits of boys' expressions of masculinity. I also discuss in these latter chapters how tastes that could be transgressive are managed by boys in ways that often do not challenge the dominant discourses of masculinity. It is here that the complexity of boys' tastes are revealed, forcing other theorists of masculinity and boy cultures to think carefully about how they operationalise hegemonic masculinity or inclusive masculinity as archetypes or theories. But first, I return to the identity pages, as they raised interesting questions about boys' tastes that this chapter begins to answer.

7.1 Boys' Tastes, Masculinity, and the Identity Pages

Results from the identity pages showed that boys mentioned a narrower range of texts than girls in their taste articulations. Broadly speaking boys tended to express preferences for sports-based texts and disliked romance texts (which followed the findings of adult men discussed by Bennett et al. 2005: 10). However, respondents that identified themselves as girls tended to articulate a wider range of texts (in both their likes and dislikes). On the whole though, this finding was not particularly strong, with a number of texts featuring in the responses regardless of their gender. This broad range of responses problematised my attempts to analyse patterns of taste, but did illuminate the diversity of tastes within the sample group. However, when prompts that demonstrated this diversity were given to the focus group participants, the gendered values of particular texts were discussed. Through

these discussions, notions of gender appropriate or inappropriate taste were at the forefront, allowing us to see how the inscription of gender into cultural texts impacts on how gender is discursively (re)produced. I found that gender appropriateness was important to how participants understood tastes and thus acted as a site for the discursive (re)production of gender.

An example of this could be sport. Sport played an important role in the responses of boys on the identity pages, and this was something that was mirrored in the conversations held in the focus groups. However sport was just one part of a much bigger range of texts that were considered to be important and appropriate for boys to like. What I found to be particularly interesting was that not only did participants use femininity as a tool in their sense-making of masculinity, but also that girls played an important role in the discursive (re)production of masculinity too. This demonstrates the usefulness of undertaking empirical youth research that engages with young people of more than just one gender. I found that one of the main ways in which texts were rendered appropriate for boys was if they held masculine value. Texts that held masculine value were considered appropriate for boys to like and allowed for the (re)production of the dominant discourses of gender.

7.2 Masculine Value

Masculine value is held by texts that are seen to be of particular importance or significance to male audiences. Texts are not inherently valuable on the grounds of gender, but rather this value is inscribed into texts by audience members (in this case, the young people that took part in the study). Thinking about texts as having some gendered value helps us to make sense of how gender is discursively (re)produced in contemporary youth taste cultures.

Gender appropriateness matters because the previous chapters have shown that young people conceive of gender in a binary, and as I show in this chapter not conforming to the 'right side' of the binary in gender expressions can lead to the problematisation of the individual's taste. As I have shown in Chapter Five, shunning is something that young people do not want to be subject to, especially in the hyper-regulatory space of high school. Understanding what has masculine value is thus of importance to boys because when a boy says that he likes something that holds masculine value he is able to align himself with, and reproduce a version of, masculinity that fits dominant discourses. If we think about this in terms of McCormack's idea of masculine capital (2012: 50), I argue that boys are able to 'buy immunity from stigma' by aligning themselves with texts that have masculine value and rejecting texts that have feminine value.⁴⁵ This allows a boy to present a (cis)male identity that is discursively appropriate. Boys' gender appropriate taste is therefore not only about recognising and responding appropriately to texts that hold masculine value, but also about rejecting the feminine. This follows existing work in the field such as that by Ging, who showed that problematic texts (such as feminine ones) "did not function as 'affirmation texts', outside of providing boys with an opportunity to perform – sometimes in highly exaggerated ways – their dislike of the texts" (2005: 46). As I discuss in Chapter Nine, texts seen to hold feminine value, such as the film *Twilight* (2008) provided moments where this appropriate 'masculine dislike' could be performed.

These 'masculine' tastes were observed in the articulations made by boys and girls in the focus groups, showing some of the more transgressive elements of girls' tastes compared to boys. The texts that the participants discussed as being valuable in terms of

⁴⁵ The implication is that texts that hold masculine capital have masculine value. However, McCormack's use of the concept 'masculine capital' is not developed, limiting the extent to which we can understand *how* the masculine capital of the text 'buys' immunity from stigma. I argue instead that by aligning with texts that have masculine value (by articulating a preference for something understood to be masculine) a masculine expression that fits the dominant discourses of masculinity is (re)produced.

masculinity very clearly featured the proponents of hegemonic masculinity such as physical strength and compulsory (hetero)sexuality (Connell, 2005), as well as “domination, aggressiveness, competitiveness, athletic prowess, stoicism and control” (Cheng, 1999: 298). I now focus on the texts that hold masculine value on these terms, contributing to the (re)production of masculinity. These texts are therefore appropriate for boys to like. One of the main areas that were seen as appropriate for boys was sport, which also featured heavily in the responses given by boys on the identity pages.

7.2.1 The Masculine Value in Sport

As the wider academic field indicates (Anderson, 2009; Swain, 2000; Gilbert and Gilbert, 1998; Renold, 1997; Messner, 1992), sport played a central role in the discussions that participants had about boys’ tastes. Discussions included ideas about the practice of sport as well as preferences for sport related texts as being appropriate for boys. The emphasis on physicality and competitiveness can help us to understand how a particular version of masculinity is evoked when participants discuss sport as being appropriate for boys to like. In the majority of the conversations about sport and boys tastes I noticed that sport was often conflated with men’s football, and so it was a particular form of sport that was evoked in these conversations as being appropriate for boys. There was a general assumption across the groups that ‘sport’ was valuable in terms of masculinity, with a range of statements made that directly reference the idea that liking sports is what boys ‘do’. For example, Anna said that “*boys worship football*” (Outskirts High, Session One), and in a different group, Josh said “*the general topic for boys is like they talk about football or games and stuff [...] like if it had football on there I’d automatically think it was a boy*” (City High, Group Two, Session One). In making sense of why it was that sport was considered so central to boys’ tastes, Joe thoughtfully drew upon the properties of hegemonic masculinity, demonstrating why sport has masculine value:

Joe: For a guy you'd talk about sport because erm I think like sport kind of is something related to like power and like masculinity so if you kind of say you're into sport it kind of shows you as yeah as kind of what boys do

(City High, group one, Session Three)

In this statement we see that Joe draws on the power that is associated with sport as a means of understanding the masculine value that sport has. Through this he shows *how* and *why* he believes sport and masculinity are connected, and this mirrors how sport and “macho versions of masculinity” (McCormack, 2011a: 86) and have been conceptualised within academic theory. In Joe's deconstruction of boys' tastes and masculinity we can see that he acknowledges that these hegemonic properties are not inherent within the text but nevertheless hold value for boys. I do not want to overstate the meaningfulness of this deconstruction, as it is alluded to within the speech rather than directly discussed, but it does reflect what I found to be a much wider awareness of gender stereotypes and their (otherwise arbitrary) association with gender exhibited by the participants.

As sport had recurred as an important text for boys in both the identity pages and the initial focus groups, I asked participants questions that I hoped would reveal more about the role that boys' preferences for sport played within their everyday experiences. It was here that I learned that while it was appropriate for boys to articulate a preference for sports, they did not often need to articulate knowledge about sport to 'prove' their taste. What was noteworthy in these conversations was that although there was a perception that 'boys like football' and that this would be an appropriate taste for boys to articulate this was not always experienced in 'real life'. Group member Naomi⁴⁶ felt that although

⁴⁶ Naomi often discussed her tastes in ways that showed she knew and acknowledged that her tastes were often more masculine than feminine, and her love of watching football was often given as an example of this. As I show in my discussions of girls' tastes, preference for texts with masculine value

boys might *say* they like football, she found they didn't always engage with football in a way that reflected this⁴⁷. In Naomi's experience:

Naomi: I ask the boys and they say they haven't watched it and I've watched all the games and that's really weird for me 'cause I watch all the Euro matches

Phoebe: A lot of boys *haven't* watched the matches

Interviewer: What makes that weird do you think?

Naomi: Because none of the boys *wa-tched* it! And *so*

Mary: And you'd stereotypically think—

Sara: —you'd expect to have a conversation with a boy about it
(City High, Group Two, Session One)

Much of this conversation shows Naomi claiming masculine taste, an area to which I turn in my discussion of girls' tastes in the following chapter, but it also illustrates that while football may hold masculine value and be an appropriate taste for boys to articulate, these boys don't necessarily exhibit much more than a basic articulation of preference on a day-to-day basis. We nevertheless see boys tied to football as shown in Naomi's use of the word *weird*, indicating that she would *expect* to find boys invested in the same way that she is. While there is awareness that these associations are constructed with the use of phrases such as "you'd stereotypically think", the discursive association between boys, sport and masculinity are nevertheless (re)produced. As the conversation continues, the group members work through strategies that allow Naomi's experiences to make sense in relation to the dominant discourses of masculinity. Emphasis in these cases is placed upon the specificities of boys' engagement with sport, where the discussion centred on the importance of *teams* to boys, rather than just everything to do with football.

Phoebe: But I think a lot of boys like certain *teams*

Josh: Yeah boys support certain teams

Juan: yeah

was not always considered inappropriate for girls as "[d]istancing oneself from stereotypical femininity [...] is a claiming of power" (Paechter, 2006: 257)

⁴⁷ I note that the majority of the focus groups took place during the early stages of the Euro 2012 football tournament.

Sara: yeah they don't watch *all*–

Josh: –I support one team, I'll only watch their matches unless it was a really good match (City High, Group Two, Session One)

By emphasising that it would be unrealistic for boys to watch *all* of the football matches that were shown and that it would be a specific team that would be followed instead, the discourse of 'boys like football' is not problematised in these accounts. We also see that Josh acts as an 'expert' in providing an explanation that he, as someone that presents as a boy, is able to offer that Naomi cannot. The masculine value of football is therefore (re)produced despite Naomi's experiences.

Although sport was commonly understood by participants as having masculine value and was thus appropriate for boys to like, it was only really football that was discussed in terms of boys' tastes. In Session Three with Group One at City High tennis was raised as a topic of conversation,⁴⁸ but this was discussed as less 'masculine' and thus less clearly appropriate for boys to like. This reveals the nuances of the masculine value of sport on the whole, and reminds us to consider *what* sport is being discussed (as well as what context given that there may also be classed elements to these discussions). I found that in the discussions about tennis the boys tended to be less enthusiastic. Although they did not display a dislike, their articulation of preference was much less pronounced than it was with football. This may be because girls sometimes articulated positive responses to tennis. For example, Erica said "*it's the only sport I watch kind of*" (City High, Group One, Session Three) and Leticia commented "*I think it's interesting and I hate sport*" (City High, Group One, Session Three). When I asked why it was that boys weren't so keen on tennis, Flora replied "*it's a girly sport*" (City High, Group One, Session Three). The boys, however, were reluctant to openly reject it on the grounds of its association with femininity, and instead

⁴⁸ The international tennis grand slam Wimbledon had just started at this point

Pedro and Joe agreed that they ultimately found it boring and couldn't watch more than a set. While they are rejecting something that is potentially associated with femininity, the boys find other reasons to talk about why they don't like it. This demonstrates the nuances in how boys' masculine identity is (re)produced through the rejection of the feminine (an issue to which I return in the final chapter in this section).

However, what would be the case if a boy at school did not articulate a preference for sport? Given that this was the case in several of the identity pages we can certainly appreciate that this must happen from time to time. A few discussions in the focus groups can help us to make sense of this. In the first instance Phoebe suggested that if a boy was new at school (and had thus not established his maleness through performances of masculinity) she did not think that he would say it straightaway "*because that's just common knowledge not to*" (Phoebe, City High, Group Two, Session One). This follows the findings in Chapter Five, where participants discussed that inappropriate taste articulations could lead to the shunning of individuals, especially if they had not established their gender identity through a series of appropriate articulations. Participants discussed that a way of combating this would be to ensure that the gender *inappropriate* articulation was balanced by a gender *appropriate* articulation. For boys then the articulation of preference for a different text that held masculine value may be enough.

The need then, to 'be into something else' was described as important by participants from Group Two at City High. Music was seen to be an important area that had the potential to hold masculine value that could balance a boys' dislike for sport. However, it was not simply *all* music that was discussed as having masculine value. It was in music that demonstrated technical skill that was seen to be appropriate for boys to like.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ This was also something that I found in the exploratory ethnography, where four boys in the cohort I followed were in a band where they played instruments. These boys often spent time talking about the bands that they liked and both the band's and their musicality (not sport).

Technical skill then, which is located in the skill needed to play instruments, follows the theorisations by Connell and Messerschmidt who argued that “in youth, skilled bodily activity becomes a prime indicator of masculinity” (2005: 851). The masculine value that they inscribed into particular forms of music therefore allowed boys to create a “particular sort of self-definition, a particular place in society” (Frith, 1987: 140).

7.2.2 The Masculine Value in Music

Juan noted that “*the people I know what don’t like sport are more into their music*” (City High, Group Two, Session One). Instruments in music play an important role in understanding where the masculine value of music is held. The masculine value of particular forms of music are thus found in the technical ability of the artists they articulate a preference for. Because more traditionally feminine genres of music such as pop tends not to show the artists as musicians, a distinction between ‘feminine music’ and ‘masculine music’ is made. By focusing on technical ability a more ‘serious’ version of music and its appreciation is associated with boys, whereas in relation to girls the feminine value of music is described as more trivial (as I discuss in the following chapter). The idea that music that is valuable in terms of masculinity is thus associated with skill and this is discussed by Joe:

Joe: I think girls care more about, as you [previous speaker] said, material things, and then boys care more about like sports and skills and music, like instruments, I think boys get more competitive over that side.
(City High, Group One, Session One)

Joe shows that instruments play an important role in allowing skill to be recognised.

Although this is not a muscular display, I argue that physicality is nevertheless a big part of this, allowing us to draw parallels to how the masculine value inscribed into sport in

relation to physicality can also be seen in this instance. This suggests that the properties of hegemonic masculinity continue to play a significant role in how young people conceive of boys' tastes and what is appropriate for them. In addition to this, through use of instruments the performer is able to demonstrate authenticity in their musicality, which has been found to have a high premium for school-age audiences (Ashley, 2011). In this discussion I have developed an understanding that explains why some forms of music hold masculine value for young people. Through these explanations we can now reflect on the findings from the identity pages, which found that guitar-based music tended to be favoured by girls and not boys. Discourses of masculinity and physicality dominated participants' discussions of the masculine value of music, (re)producing these discourses in the process. Thus what girls' preferences for this form of music shows is that they do not necessarily distance themselves from these forms of music despite there being a collective understanding that the music holds masculine value. As my discussion of music and feminine value reveals, there are many reasons why girls may favour the masculine value of music, demonstrating the breadth of appropriate taste for girls.

The next area that was discussed as having masculine value was in relation to the texts that enabled an articulation of sexual longing for females, demonstrating the operation of compulsory (heterosexuality) within hegemonic masculinity. In discussions about celebrities such as Katie Price and Megan Fox, I found that participants thought that showing a preference for such women would be appropriate for boys and in this an assumption that this preference was based on sexual grounds was (re)produced.

7.2.3 The Masculine Value in (Hetero)Sexual Desire

Discussions of 'glamour stars' such as British glamour model Katie Price and American actress Megan Fox⁵⁰ allow us to see how the preference for particular celebrities is understood as having masculine value, thus being gender appropriate for boys. When discussing this, participants focused on the bodies of these celebrities to emphasise their value in terms of masculinity. Such celebrities are therefore appropriate for boys to like because there is an assumption that boys like them because they are 'sexy'. There are a lot of female celebrities that we can understand as having this objectified role within contemporary culture, but as Fox and Price were mentioned specifically by the participants, I will use the discussions held in the focus groups to reveal how the participants' discussed these gendered understandings and assumptions.

In terms of Katie Price, comments about her body were most prevalent. For example, Owls remarked that "*boys would probably go for her because [...] she's got nice curves*" (Girls High, Session One), meanwhile Phoebe joked that "*they're [boys] not in it for her personality*" (City High, Group Two, Session Two) and Mary said "*they like looking at her!*" (City High, Group Two, Session Two). These were similar to the comments that were made about Megan Fox, which suggested that it would only be boys that like Megan Fox because she is a celebrity that is sexualised. For example, Eliza commented that "*she's what the boys look at on their phones, not a girl thing*" (Outskirts High, Session Three) and Joe said "*coz, Megan Fox, no girl likes Megan Fox*" (City High, Group One, Session Two). It is notable that Joe actively displayed his preference for Fox in the focus groups, making comments like:

Interviewer: let's go back to Megan Fox for a minute because—

⁵⁰ On the prompts Katie Price/Jordan featured as a disliked celebrity on two of the prompts (Prompt 2 and Prompt 5) and Megan Fox was listed as a liked celebrity on Prompt 5.

Joe: –yeah, lets!
Interviewer: –it seems you didn't have a set opinion. What is it that you like so much about Megan Fox?
Joe: [laughs]
Leticia: yeah, what do you like so much about Megan Fox, Joe?
Joe: I think she's rather beautiful
[...]
Joe: [gestures 'breasts' by cupping his hands by his chest] because she has like, rather big boobies, so boys like her, and girls sort of like, I think girls, they don't like her coz, either they think she's fake, and don't like her how [...] she's, like, yeah I don't think that they like that every boy likes her, in a way.
Erica: I don't think that's true
Pedro: I'm partial to her
Erica: I just don't have any interest in Megan Fox because she's just not into the films that I really like, so,
Joe: exactly, I don't think any girl would have an interest in Megan Fox because, for any reason,
Interviewer: you're shaking your head at the back there
Mel: I just don't think that girls really like Megan Fox, like, I don't know
Joe: because boys go on about her too much.
Erica: you [Joe] do talk about her
Joe: sorry!
(City High, Group One, Session Two)

In this conversation we can see a range of gendered assumptions being made. I return to discussions of Price and Fox below in my analysis of girls' rejections so in this section I just want to think about how masculinity is (re)produced through this performance of desire toward Fox. Here we see Joe dismissing the potential that a girl could or would like Megan Fox because he finds her to be so appealing, and as part of this he also makes the assumption that 'every boy likes her'. He performs gender appropriate (hetero)sexual desire by making reference to Fox's breasts, indicating that this is what has value for boys. In the other group at City High Phoebe suggested that she could only imagine a girl liking Fox if "*she could be a lesbian*" (Group Two, Session Two). However, this comment was followed by laughter, suggesting that this would be an unlikely and incongruous situation, rather than a readily experienced one. This shows that girls *could* like something that has value in terms of masculinity, but only if the girl adopted a masculine position and adopts the (heterosexual) male gaze.

What these examples illustrate is that (hetero)sexual desire is (re)produced as part of young people's sense making of what is valuable in terms of masculinity. In their conversations about Fox and Price we see that they are positioned as sexual objects and thus assumed to be appropriate for boys to like. By saying that one likes a sexualised celebrity one is thus able to align oneself with masculinity (and this is gender appropriate for boys). In the following section I show how masculine value is also inscribed into texts that foreground violence and conflict, areas that are also considered integral to hegemonic masculinity.

7.2.4 The Masculine Value of Violence and Conflict

Properties of hegemonic masculinity such as aggression and violence (Cheng, 1999: 298) played an important role in how participants talked about the gender appropriateness of texts that portrayed violence. Importantly, texts from horror and action genres were found to have significance for boys in past studies (Ging, 2005: 33), and so this study reveals the pervasiveness of these discourses. Again, as I will discuss below, some girls articulated preferences for these types of texts and this was not necessarily problematic.

In the conversations about action films and programmes a number of participants discussed them being appropriate for boys to like. For example, Joe commented that *"I'm not being sexist or stereotyping, but I think boys more prefer the action"* (City High, Group One, Session Two). Again, Joe was wary of essentialising the connection between boys and action, but was a participant that often reflected on the physicality offered by a text in terms of its appropriateness for boys. For example, when discussing the tastes of respondent 156, Joe refers to all of the texts that he sees as representing action and conflict, and draws out their connection to masculinity:

Joe: He kind of likes a bit of action, I mean Doctor Who, obviously I wouldn't say it's *massively* action

packed, but there's like guns and stuff, and then like the celebrities, yeah well they are conflicty, and erm, Avatar, that's kind of about war and yeah. So yeah obviously, and, yeah . . . yeah. Conflict, violence, action
(City High, Group One, Session Two)

By summing up at the end, "*conflict, violence, action*", Joe reinforces his understanding of the texts holding masculine value by associating them "*obviously*" to a "*he*". In this statement Joe also discussed some of the texts that hold these properties but that may be less obviously 'masculine' such as *Doctor Who* (BBC, 1963 – present). When he discusses *Doctor Who* he describes it as "*not massively action packed*" (and thus not *too* masculine) but is nevertheless able to inscribe it with masculine value by mentioning that the programme features "*guns and stuff*" – signifiers of conflict (and thus masculinity). The inscription of masculine value into these texts and thus the assumption that these were the (gender appropriate) tastes of a boy were repeated across the focus groups. Common responses included, "*easy, boy!*" (Rachel, City High, Group Two, Session Two); "*it's definitely a guy*" (Sara, City High, Group Two, Session Two), "*it's a boy*" (Juan, City High, Group Two, Session Two); "*oh it's a guy!*" (Eliza, Outskirts High, Session Two) and "*this is a Troy!*"⁵¹ (Tom, Outskirts High, Session Two).⁵²

Horror was another area where participants drew on the collective understanding of violence and conflict as being imbued with masculine value. Horror was a genre that on the whole was seen to have masculine value, but was not considered as solely for boys. For example, Sara noted that "*boys and girls like horror but boys do prefer them*" (City High, Group Two, Session Two). However, this is complicated by Lauren who considers the

⁵¹ Here Tom is making reference to fellow participant Troy, who was absent from this session.

⁵² Interestingly, at Girls High, the participants (without everyday boy reference points at school) were less likely to see a preference for action as 'for boys', being equally likely to imagine girls articulating these preferences (this is an area that I return to below in Chapter Nine).

intersection of age, commenting that *“but older teenagers that are girls, like horrors, but most like, from a younger teenage kind of age like horrors, so it’s more about age”* (City High, Group Two, Session Two). In this comment Lauren helps us to make sense of why it is that over time girls may come to like horror, whereas boys are conceived of as those that like the genre more inherently. This is not to say that there won’t be boys that dislike horror (as with the other texts that were seen to have masculine value), but rather that within these spaces this is not something that was expressed and thus the discursive association between horror as something boys like, was (re)produced. For example, Leticia said *“most boys, stereotypically, most boys think horror is amazing”* (City High, Group One, Session Four). When Leticia clarifies by saying ‘stereotypically’ she shows that she doesn’t necessarily believe the association between horror and boys to be essential. Nevertheless, the association is discursively (re)produced. This also featured in a different session, where the girls discuss the gendered dimensions of taste:

Sara: if there’s like a typical girl, if someone says oh they like Justin Bieber you assume it’s a girl if someone says they like, like horror then you assume it’s a boy, it’s just...
Mary: ...no with horror I wouldn’t always assume it’s a boy
Sara: not alright no but straight off, like
Rachel: your gut instinct would be that that is a guy
(City High, Group Two, Session Two)

Although Mary says that she ‘wouldn’t always assume it’s a boy’, Sara and Rachel reason that on a very basic level ‘gut instinct’ the assumption is that someone who articulates a preference for horror would likely be a boy. I believe this is because horror has masculine value and thus it would be more appropriate for a boy to like. This is because horror has components of hegemonic masculinity. It would therefore allow a boy to (re)produce a gender appropriate masculinity.

In the discussions there was very little justification given by the participants as to why they believed that horror had masculine value. However, in conversations on different

topics where death on screen was represented, associations between death (especially violent death) and masculinity were given. It is for this reason that I believe some of the masculine value that is inscribed into horror texts is located within the violence of the death. For example, in a discussion about the film *Titanic* a distinction is made between representations of death that are more for girls (feminine) and representations of death that are more for boys (masculine):

Phoebe: because it's romance, but then there's like ultimate death in it
so

Interviewer: ultimate death

Phoebe: yeah people die and get a bit of love in it too

Mary: yeah but that's the kind of death films that girls like

Rachel: yeah but its sad death it's like emotional death isn't it not gruesome death, like blood and gore and that

Lauren: it's not like [in gruff voice] *give me your money or I'm gonna finish you!*

Juan: yeah but people die in Disney films for god sake so
(City High, Group Two, Session Four)

Gendered understandings are present across this dialogue but for the sake of simplicity and relevance to my discussion of masculine value I will focus on the (re)production of masculinity. In this Phoebe sees death as masculine while romance is feminine (which I return to below). However, her peers did not see the masculine value of death as being great enough to supersede the feminine value of romance which ultimately meant that the film was inscribed with feminine value. The representation of death is therefore significant as this plays a role in the gendered value that it is seen to hold. For example Rachel says that it's not masculine because it's not 'gruesome' or has 'gore' and Lauren says that it needs to be accompanied with violence in order to be masculine ('*give me your money or I'm gonna finish you!*'). Meanwhile Juan uses the example of a highly feminine and childish (con)text, Disney, to make the case that not all death can be understood in masculine terms. This conversation therefore gives us insight into the gendering of texts and thus how some forms of death, such as those associated with horror films, can be understood to

have masculine value. The above conversations show that this is nuanced and that young people are nevertheless sophisticated meaning makers when it comes to understanding how and/or why some texts hold particular forms of gendered value. Through the emphasis on 'blood and gore' we can again see the connection between the properties of hegemonic masculinity and the texts that are inscribed with masculine value. The nuances of this form of hegemonic masculinity, and the role it plays in boys' lives, is exemplified in their discussions of the celebrity/cultural text, Chuck Norris. By focusing on this as a small case study I can elucidate some of these complexities.

7.2.5 Case Study: Chuck Norris

I want to focus on Chuck Norris here because he offers us a useful case study for thinking through masculine value, boys' tastes and their complex relationship with one another.⁵³ This is because Chuck Norris represents the embodiment of hegemonic masculinity, boys articulated preference for him with relish, and yet his version of hegemonic masculinity was also ridiculed. Chuck Norris is a martial artist and actor who has starred in numerous action films over his career from the 1970s to the current day. As a result of his prominence in these violent films he has acquired a cult status on the basis of his hypermasculinity, as Reuben exclaimed "*he's the manliest man!*" (City High, Group Two, Session Two). Tasker has noted that Norris' characters follow a series of (primarily 1980s) action heroes that dramatise "a certain macho self-indulgence which depicts the triumph of the white male hero" (1993: 63). Norris' hypermasculinity means that he doesn't just hold masculine value, but he holds *much* masculine value, and this was discussed in all of the focus groups

⁵³ Chuck Norris was featured on one of the prompts, whether or not he would have been reflected upon without this is unclear. As such I do not wish to overstate the role he plays in contemporary youth taste cultures, but rather to demonstrate the ways in which cultural texts are gendered and the ways in which they are discussed with this gendering in mind.

(except Girls High who notably, in their all-girl context, were not familiar with the cult of Chuck Norris).

In the focus groups I observed the ways in which boys articulated these appropriate tastes by displaying not just preference for but also knowledge about Chuck Norris.⁵⁴ This was demonstrated using humour through reference to a range of jokes and cultural memes, predominantly by male participants. The enthusiasm that boys have been seen to hold for Norris was described by Sara, who commented that *“there’s like, more, so many boys joke, make like Chuck Norris jokes than girls”* (City High, Group Two, Session Two). I believe that in these discussions we can see boys (re)producing masculinity through ‘insider knowledge’, which allows boys authenticity over girls in their performance of masculinity. For example, at Outskirts High Tom performed the role of Chuck Norris ‘expert’ with relish:

Chloe: if you Google—

where is Chuck Norris it comes up with you can’t find Chuck Norris just run before he finds you

Tom: —if you put Chuck Norris into Google and push I’m feeling lucky it will come up this page you can’t find Chuck Norris Chuck Norris always finds you

Katherine: that’s what she just said!

Chloe: yeah, I did just say that

Tom: I said I’m feeling lucky
(Outskirts High, Session Two)

Here Tom not only talks over Chloe, but when this is pointed out to him he corrects her knowledge with his. In this instance we see Tom undermine Chloe’s knowledge, allowing him to sustain his performance of masculine knowledge above that of Chloe’s. In a different context (City High), knowledge of Norris was relayed by one of the boys but this was enacted in a different way to that discussed above. In Session Two at City High, Juan was the only male to attend this focus group and thus the context was dominated by the

⁵⁴ More so than I did with boys and football.

presence of girls. Although Sara displayed some knowledge, relaying the Google story offered above, when participants wanted further information they turned to Juan, the only male in the room. This demonstrates the ways in which texts that hold masculine value are overwhelmingly associated with boys. Juan did display knowledge of Norris, but when qualifying why he held this knowledge he drew upon his family's cultural heritage, rather than 'innate' masculine 'knowing' that was performed by Reuben, Pedro and Tom in the other sessions. In these conversations Juan said he knows 'that stuff' because he grew up watching Kung-Fu movies and that his parents "*only watch it because they're Chinese to be honest*" (City High, Group Two, Session Two). This shows us the complexities of masculinity as Juan did not articulate an alignment with Norris in ways I saw in the other groups, and as participants describe experience of. The reasons for these differences cannot be fully known but part of the reason may have been due to the lack of boys in the room, and the girls were not particularly interested in Chuck Norris. Race may also have played a role in Juan's articulations, with Juan's intersecting mixed-race identity impacting on his experience and performance of masculinity in this instance.

By looking at the case of Chuck Norris an understanding of the masculine value of action texts is (re)produced in relation to boys. A focus on Norris also demonstrates the complexities of how these tastes are articulated, with knowledge of Norris being displayed differently in all of the groups (but all in some way connecting to the taste cultures of boys). What a focus on Norris has revealed is that in his masculine value boys are able to associate and align themselves with a prototypical version of hegemonic masculinity, showing the concept's continued relevance in relation to how we understand the lives of boys.

The ways in which action/conflict texts were discursively (re)produced as having masculine value (and thus appropriate for boys to like) is significant in light of the concerns of youth masculinity as connected to physical violence and aggression (Frosh, Phoenix and

Pattman, 2002: 1; Gilbert and Gilbert, 1998: 13), 'the crisis of masculinity' (Abbott, 2013; Nayak and Kehily, 2007: 43), and the negative impact that the failed promises of hegemonic masculinity have been theorised as having on the lives of boys (Consalvo, 2005). However, because action films are seen as appropriate for boys to like does not mean that boys are thus 'violent'. Participants did not talk about how boys *are* violent, but rather that texts that foreground violence/action were valuable in terms of masculinity and that they would thus be appropriate for boys to like. It is nevertheless significant that discourses of hegemonic masculinity that connect masculinity with aggression and physicality were (re)produced within these discussions.

The findings that I have presented thus far indicate that the model of hegemonic masculinity offered by Connell (1995) is (more or less) accurate. Of the texts that I have found to be inscribed with masculine value, all represent hegemonic masculinity in one way or another. Within these discussions it is boys that are assumed to like them. However, in the following section I complicate the certainty offered by Connell's model, showing that 'too much masculinity' is equally problematic, further demonstrating the complexity of masculinity for the lives of boys.

7.3 'They're Trying to Assert Their Manliness': Regulating excessive masculinities

Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity is not only challenged by theories of inclusive masculinity, but also in moments where the 'prototypical' hegemonic male is rejected by participants. In the discussion of the prompt that was written by respondent 156 (from the identity pages), discussions took place across the focus groups that revealed how a boy's expression of masculinity can be rendered inappropriate if he articulates a like for *too*

many texts that have high levels of masculine value.⁵⁵ Respondent 156 described his gender as ‘manly male’ and exemplified hegemonic masculinity across his taste articulations. The texts he chose can be seen to hold masculine value due to their proximity to conflict (including Chuck Norris and Osama Bin Laden) as well rejecting a range of texts associated with femininity (such as Justin Bieber and Hello Kitty as I discuss in the following chapter). This combination led some group members to question the authenticity of his taste, which was described as ‘try-hard’ by many members. In the discussions that exemplify this (which took place during the ‘Matching-Up Exercise’), Reuben criticised the respondent for using the words ‘Manly Male’ to describe his gender. In this criticism Reuben lowered his voice so it became very deep and said “*manly male*” (City High, Group One, Session Four). In this instance Reuben draws on a range of conceptions of hegemonic masculinity in order to mimic and thus mock the respondent. Firstly, by lowering his voice in tone and pitch, Reuben draws on the cultural understandings of men as having deep voices (Jackson and Dangerfield, 2002: 121). But rather than simply (re)producing the discourse, Reuben is mocking this form of masculinity, mirroring the ways in which Cole found in her study that males employed deep voices as a way of mocking masculinity (2012: 5). It is here then that we see Reuben demonstrate the artifice of masculinity through performance. Wider responses from the participants ridiculed the taste articulations of the ‘Manly Male’. These were articulated as either an inauthentic self, or a ‘try-hard’ who was attempting to be funny but failing to do so. The first issue that one of the groups had with Respondent 156 was in trying to appear funny:

Reuben: well it’s just–

Erica: –just trying to seem so manly!

⁵⁵ It is not clear what would happen if a person that presented as female expressed these articulations, but my findings suggest that this would be met with similar responses. Based on my findings it may be suggested that a girl has ‘something to prove’ as she is claiming power, while I find for boys he may have ‘something to hide’. Either way the articulation of masculinity is excessive, regardless of the gender of the person making the articulation.

Reuben: –they’re trying to seem funny
Pedro: Yeah
Reuben: by saying manly male [.] In his eyes he’s probably funny
(City High, Group One, Session Four)

This ridicule also took place in Group Two at City High, where Phoebe and Sara discussed how they believe this person *thought* that they were being funny, when in their opinion they were not. As part of this conversation Sara says, “*like, trying to be funny to be popular*” (City High, Group Two, Session Two), showing that one of the reasons for making these articulations would be in an attempt to be popular. That the participants rejected this follows my theory that popularity and gender are very different, and thus one should not assume to be *more masculine* is to be *more popular*. That said it is noteworthy that all of the participants did laugh when presented with the prompt, much more so than when looking at the other prompts. Notably it is girls that are regulating masculinity in this instance. This is notable as much of the youth masculinity literature has not looked at the role that girls play in the (re)production of hegemonic masculinity – showing the usefulness of examining more than one gender empirically.

At Outskirts High, the response to this form of ‘excessive’ masculinity was to question the motivations of someone that would display it, while also mocking and using insults to describe the sort of person they thought it would be:

Katherine: vain
Chloe: arrogant
Troy: bit of a twunk
Eliza: yeah, I’d say a vain person, describe your gender *I’m a manly male*, who says that?!
Chloe: clearly you’re in denial about something!
(Outskirts High, Session Three)

In all of these cases, it was ‘trying too hard’ that was considered to be problematic, both in terms of their masculinity and of their presentation of identity more broadly. This follows Thornton’s claim that “[n]othing depletes capital more than someone trying too hard”

(1995: 12). Within the context of gender it shows that excessive articulations of preference for texts inscribed with masculine value is rendered problematic by the participants in this study.

In the problematisation of excessive masculinity we can see that the performance of hegemonic masculinity may not be as clear cut as we might imagine. As I show below, 'not-being-feminine' is crucially important to boys, but it seems in this finding that so too is 'not-being-*too*-masculine'. This requires us to ask further questions of how we think about hegemonic masculinity, as the performance of the 'prototypical' hypermasculine self was not one that was valued in the focus groups.

7.4 Concluding Remarks

We can already see the complexity of boys' taste cultures and we have yet to take into account femininity and/or girls' tastes. I have showed that there are a range of texts and genres that are inscribed with masculine value and are thus texts that boys could (gender) appropriately articulate a preference for. These texts included football, action films and texts that represent violence as well as texts that allow for (hetero)sexual desire to be performed. Within these texts I have argued that masculine value is located in the text's representation of the proponents of hegemonic masculinity, or, in allowing the performer to (re)produce them through taste articulation. This would suggest that hegemonic masculinity plays an important role young people's understanding of boys tastes. However, I have found that there are limits to these hegemonic forms of masculinity, showing that 'too much' could be as potentially problematic as too little. Given that gender operates on a spectrum it will therefore be useful to see the role that femininity plays, as developing an understanding of femininity will be able to tell us much about not only how girls' tastes cultures are understood, but boys' too. Due to my focus on masculine value in this section, I have not yet elucidated the ways in which boys (and some girls) also actively

distance themselves from texts that are inscribed with feminine value. It is therefore useful for me to now turn to the texts that were seen to hold feminine value and consider the ways in which they were discussed and/or aligned with. In understanding the complexities of feminine value I will be able to better elucidate the ways in which gender is (re)produced relationally, as well as how distancing from femininity is enacted by many young people (not just boys).

Chapter Eight

Appropriate Tastes for Girls and Discourses of Femininity

The discussion of appropriate tastes for girls and the (re)production of femininity is significantly more complex than is the case for boys and masculinity. This is because the devaluation of the feminine in a patriarchal context means that girls don't align themselves with femininity in the ways that I found boys did with masculinity. Indeed in a number of cases I found that girls also align themselves with masculinity, further complicating our understanding of the (re)production of gender within contemporary youth taste cultures. To work through these complexities I structure this section following a similar pattern to that above, examining the (few) instances where texts were inscribed with feminine value, and think about the grounds on which these values are allocated. I then turn to cases where *ways* of articulating tastes were gendered as feminine by participants. In doing so I am able to better elucidate the (re)production of gender within contemporary youth taste cultures.

In order to explain the ways in which femininity is (re)produced by young people I continue to emphasise the relationality of gender and its construction. But by thinking about femininity as distinct from masculinity (as well as femaleness) we can gain a sense of what femininity *means* for young people. Femininities have often been the site of academic interrogation when it comes to the lives of girls (see Aapola, Gonick and Harris, 2005) and this thesis will contribute to these conversations. But I will also show how and why it is useful to think of femininity as distinct from 'girlness'. I show that girls' tastes have a complex relationship with what may or may not be considered 'appropriate' for them as girls.

Because femininity is overwhelmingly associated with those that present as female, which is something that is found in the academic literature as well as in the discussions I had with participants, much of this section is concerned with girls' taste cultures. However, as I will show, boys play a significant role in maintaining femininity as distinct from masculinity. I argued in Chapter One that the concept of femininity occupies a peculiar position within academic theory. This is because femininity has been understood not only in broad terms, "the umbrella term for all the different ways in which women are defined by others and themselves" (Järviluoma, Moisala, Vilko, 2003: 17), but also negative ones, being "perceived more as a stereotype of a woman's role from the past" (Gauntlett, 2008: 11). I show in this chapter that in many instances girls distance themselves from femininity when they talk about the things that 'girls' like, but in other instances I found that girls embrace some of the things that femininity allows them to do (such as fangirling). With this in mind I work through the highly nuanced experiences that girls (in particular) were found to negotiate, in a context where competing patriarchal, feminist and postfeminist discourses have informed what femininity can be. Following the findings of Nayak and Kehily,⁵⁶ I argue that cultural consumption (and in this case taste cultures) offer "opportunities where femininities can be endlessly produced, defined and enhanced" (2008: 141). But unlike Nayak and Kehily, I believe that the genders here do not "operate simultaneously as imagined and ideal everyday practice" (2008: 142). This is because the femininities that the participants discussed in this study did not appear to confer much value. I found that the lingering presence of 'traditional femininity' meant that the girls' femininities were unable to confer cultural power, often leading the participants to reject it.

Within the findings that I present in this thesis, discourses of 'what girls do' were central to how participants understood *other people's* 'feminine' cultural consumption.

⁵⁶ Who were investigating the collective readings of comic books.

However, when it came to their own tastes the participants that presented as female were keen to demonstrate their agency in relation to these discourses. Instead, the dominant discourses of femininity were often (re)produced as a marker in how many of the girls did *not* want to be seen. These ‘stubbornly persistent’ (to use Gill and Scharff’s (2011: 2) terminology) or, ‘traditional’ femininities, were seen as offering girls dissatisfying possibilities in terms of what they felt they could *do* with them. The dissatisfying possibilities offered by these discursively dominant understandings of femininity can help us to see why ‘femininity’ is understood by young people as holding lesser value than masculinity (in the most part). In the (re)production of this understanding however, we can see how discourses of femininity as without value remain discursively dominant. And, of course, there are moments where this is complicated. For example, ‘feminine’ skills such as caring and listening were sometimes understood by participants as being meaningful and valuable.

Unlike for boys, when it came to girls’ preferences the ‘feminine’ was not necessarily considered problematic (as it was almost always for boys). Nevertheless it was only in specific contexts that the feminine could offer satisfying rather than dissatisfying possibilities. In the most part feminine and masculine ‘value’ were not even, with the feminine not holding much value comparatively. This study can therefore help us to better understand why it is that discourses of femininity are consistently (re)produced as secondary to masculinity, and thus why it might be that it is not only boys that actively distance themselves from these forms of femininity, but girls too.

Theoretically it is the fixed-yet-unfixed nature of ‘femininity’ that complicates how we can conceive of taste cultures and gender. This is both in terms of how the participants talk about them, as well as how we can theorise them as academics. Additionally, unlike for boys, homophobia has not been found to have the same regulatory force on girls’

expressions of gender. This is something that the participants discussed and has been reflected on in Chapter Six, and may go some way to explaining why I found that young people of different genders have such different experiences of taste.⁵⁷

In this section I show that there are many more appropriate tastes for girls than there are for boys. I argue that this is in part due to the perceived value of masculinity and lack of value of femininity within a patriarchal context. Girls are much freer to articulate preferences for masculine texts without being shunned on the grounds of inappropriate taste because the masculine is understood as being more universally valuable. The masculine is not necessarily aspirational for girls as it may be for boys, but it is certainly not off limits as I will show femininity to be for boys. Many of my findings therefore fit with Paechter (2006), who argues that the masculine is about claiming power, while the feminine does not hold power and cannot confer power. However, I show just how complex this issue is when worked out in the lived realities of young people. Rather than simply being the case that “[d]istancing oneself from hegemonic or hypermasculinity is about giving up power” (Paechter, 2006: 256) I have shown that boys need *some* distance or else their ‘try hard’ masculinity will be problematised. I find similar complexities with femininities, and rather than distancing being a *claiming* of power (Paechter, 2006: 257), in some instances the feminine did have value. When we think about this in relation to the findings of the identity pages, we can come to understand why such variety was found. Before I discuss the texts that were inscribed with feminine value, I first revisit the identity pages and consider the complexities of girls’ tastes in relation to these findings.

⁵⁷ This is not to suggest that girls are not the subject of homophobia, but rather that it has been discussed by both the young people in this study, and the wider academic field as being experienced differently for girls (see Nayak and Kehily, 2008).

8.1 Girls' Tastes, Femininity, and the Identity Pages

The identity pages showed that girls tended to offer a wider range of responses than those given by boys. While some types of texts, such as romance texts, were more present in the responses of those that described themselves as girls, there were fewer texts or themes that recurred in the same way that did for boys. This indicated that while there was nuance and diversity across genders in the identity pages, this was pronounced in the responses given by girls. As I noted in Chapter Four, this diversity problematised my attempts to draw conclusions on the grounds of gender. However, when given to the participants in the focus groups, a clear understanding of how these tastes could be understood was demonstrated. This allowed me to see how femininity was (re)produced when participants discussed the tastes they imagined (or experienced) as belonging to girls.

In many of these cases girls' taste cultures were considered less in terms of femininity than boys' ones were in terms of masculinity. Instead, participants tended to see girls' tastes as residual ones, whereby if it was not 'definitely a boy' (having only texts with masculine value included), then the assumption would be that the prompt-writer was female. Such assumptions follow the findings of the identity pages (on the whole) as they further demonstrate the variety of girls' tastes and the broader potential of girls' tastes. That said, this suggests that 'anything goes' as far as girls' tastes are concerned and the focus groups revealed that it was much more complex than this. I show that although girls can make taste articulations that favour texts with masculine value, the feminine is not necessarily rejected. Also, on some occasions when girls' preference for texts with masculine value was discussed I found that these too could be problematised. The former is demonstrated by participants such as Naomi at City High and Anna at Outskirts High. Both of these participants discuss liking football, something that has a lot of masculine value, but for Naomi alongside this taste she expresses a preference for One Direction,

while Anna discussed how much she likes Disney films (texts that were inscribed with feminine value). Such findings highlight the importance of actually speaking to young people and undertaking empirical research, as it only through this approach that we can work through the complexities of what young people's taste cultures *mean* and how they are experienced. Following the structure taken above, I first explore the idea of feminine value and what texts the participants inscribe it into. This is before I move on to explore how femininity is seen in *ways* of articulating. This gives us a solid understanding of what femininity is in relation to youth taste cultures, and can help to contextualise the distancing from it that I examine in the final chapter of this section.

8.2 Feminine Value

The pervasiveness of hegemonic masculinity within contemporary culture meant that it was relatively straightforward for the participants to discuss texts holding masculine value, as well as for me to identify them in this research. The identification of texts that have feminine value is much more complex and much of this is due to the lack of consensus as to what femininity means and what value it holds (or can hold) within a patriarchal context. Thus far I have shown how boys and some girls can distance themselves from femininity (by liking texts that have masculine value, such as sports or horror films). Developing an understanding of why it is that femininity is discursively (re)produced as having less cultural value than masculinity is therefore not only useful in terms of answering the research questions posed in this thesis, but also for the wider feminist field which is concerned with the reproduction of patriarchal values

Previous research has found that for some (female) audiences, great pleasure can be gained from the consumption of feminine texts, and much of this pleasure is located in its feminineness (Radway, 1987; Ang, 1985; Modleski, 1984). With this in mind it would not be surprising to find that some young people like texts that hold feminine value. But of

course liking something is different to articulating a preference for something, which is when taste is made public. While the aforementioned studies found that there is pleasure to be found in feminine texts, they tell us nothing of how these pleasures are negotiated in relation to dominant discourses of gender and value by contemporary young people.

While I have argued that boys may articulate a preference for something with masculine value as a means of 'buying immunity from stigma' (to use McCormack's (2012) terminology) it is difficult to see how this would be the case with femininity. However, just because femininity may not be able to confer value or status onto the person that articulates a preference for it does not mean that the text itself cannot be inscribed with value in terms of 'femininity' anyway. If a text can be inscribed with masculine value and be considered important in terms of masculinity then we can conceive of a similar process taking place with femininity too. In the case of masculinity I found that texts were inscribed with masculine value if they represented or conveyed the proponents of hegemonic masculinity in some way. Existing research has argued that there can be no hegemonic femininity (Gill and Scharff, 2011; Paechter, 2006; Connell, 1987) because "[f]emininities are not constructed in the same ways masculinities are; they do not confer cultural power, nor are they able to guarantee patriarchy" (Paechter, 2006: 256). Instead terms like 'emphasised femininity' (Connell, 1987) or 'hyperfemininity' (Paechter, 2006) have been used to describe the dominant idea(s) of what femininity is. In this thesis I understand the femininities that are inscribed into texts as being 'traditional (emphasised/hyper) femininities'. This is because they mirror past femininities such as those that Gauntlett (2008) described as being how femininity is often understood. When participants talked about the texts that they understood as valuable in terms of femininity these sorts of 'traditional' properties were common features. For example, romance texts were the main area seen to be valuable in terms of femininity. In romance texts elements such as emotionality were seen by participants to be of particular significance to female audiences.

It is interesting to note that while participants had a clear idea of what has masculine value, they were less clear about what had feminine value. Instead there were *ways* of articulating tastes that participants understood as being gendered, with particular reasons for liking texts (such as heterosexual longing or an interest in the private) that were understood to be feminine. I also found that some of the male participants described how the emotionality of femininity was something that they also found to be valuable, showing how boys *do* see value in the feminine and find ways of articulating this in group discussions.

Broadly speaking, understanding feminine value allows us to think about how girls are only able to 'enjoy' a greater breadth of appropriate taste because cultures of the feminine have been found to be symbolically *devalued* (by boys and girls). This is a double-edged sword because girls are only awarded freedoms in their tastes because 'being girls' means that they are already associated with femininity (which has diminished value). Equally, this devaluation of the feminine also limits the articulations that boys are able to make. I found that boys' preferences for texts with feminine value were often problematised, (re)producing masculinity in the process. In order to better understand these complexities I will now work through the few areas inscribed with feminine value, romance texts, before discussing how tastes were articulated in relation to these texts.

8.2.1 The Feminine Value of Romance

Feminine value was inscribed by participants into romance texts on the grounds that they contain elements of love and intimate relationships, which participants saw as being of interest for girls. Participant Erica's comment, "*romance targets girls*" (City High, Group One, Session One) broadly captures this idea. On the whole, participants made assumptions that girls like romance texts on the grounds that issues of love and relationships were of primary interest to girls.

The inscription of feminine value into romance texts was observed across a range of cultural forms, with participants locating the ‘femininity of romance’ within songs, movies and television programmes. In *many* cases participants connoted romance with femininity so heavily, it was so ‘obvious’, that they did not often say explicitly that romance was feminine and/or for girls. For example, when speaking hypothetically, Josh said that if someone said they liked a romance text it “*could have definitely given it away* [as being a girl]” (City High, Group Two, Session One). Assumptions made about girls’ tastes show the ways in which romance texts are understood to be feminine (and thus valuable on the grounds of femininity). This is not to say that participants uncritically accept that girls (essentially) like romance, but rather that through the association between femininity and girls’ tastes, this discourse is dominant.⁵⁸ These discourses are thus used in the (re)production of gender appropriate taste.

A range of discursive devices were used by participants that (re)produce discourses of romance as being ‘inherently’ feminine. One of the main strategies was to connect feminine ‘skills’ such as maintaining relationships and having an interest in ‘love and emotion’ with girls (and women more broadly).⁵⁹ This was most explicitly discussed by Joe at City High, who also demonstrates the wider value of these feminine forms:

Joe: I think girls, I mean, this isn’t for everyone, but I think guys, kind of have a laugh about things, I think girls take love a bit more seriously, and I think, girls are better for that, I don’t like the fact that I look at it and I’ll have a laugh about it. I mean, I know when to take it serious, but most of the time I just look at it, yeah, well I just don’t focus that much on romance, I

⁵⁸ These discourses are (re)produced in the *distance* seen between romance and proponents of hegemonic masculinity (emotionality in opposition to physicality). The ‘femininity of romance’ is thus also inscribed in part in this absence of masculinity.

⁵⁹ This is similar to the ways in which masculine value was inscribed to texts that represented hegemonic masculinity.

don't get lovey dovey feelings as much as I think a girl would.
(City High, Group One, Session One)

In this quote we see that Joe very clearly connects girls with relationships and love, suggesting that girls take these things 'more seriously'. In this instance Joe draws a connection between cultural texts (he was talking about romance films prior to this excerpt) and his understanding of feminine emotionality. What is also significant in this quote is that Joe thinks girls are 'better for that', showing that he sees *value* in these proponents of femininity. This demonstrates the complexities of feminine value. Although I found that the feminine is largely devalued in comparison to the masculine, we find here an example of the wider value of femininity being acknowledged. Given that Joe, who presents as a boy, was able to make this articulation shows that there is much nuance in the way in which femininity is negotiated by young people. This shows us that although being understood as of lesser value than masculinity, what is understood as feminine is not understood as being entirely valueless. Understanding this may help us to make sense of why it is that the feminine is not entirely rejected by all young people. Of course though, of the traits that are able to convert to wider social and cultural power, femininity is significantly limited in comparison to masculinity.

This association between girls and romance was pervasive, and was demonstrated in a range of conversations across the focus groups. For example, when discussing the television programme *90210* (The CW, 2008 – 2013) participants at City High discuss relationships as having feminine value for girls:

Phoebe: it's a girl thing

Mary: yeah it's—

Naomi: —it's about relationships

Phoebe: you don't really get many boys on there

Juan: because it's seen as a girl's thing many boys wouldn't even give it a try

Mary: it's a lot about relationships and boys don't really give . a . damn about relationships

Rachel: yeah
(City High, Group Two, Session Two)

This quote also illustrates the relationality of gender, with 'what boys do' figuring in why participants think girls like *90210*. Also in this quote we see that the show's emphasis on relationships is what makes it valuable to girls and not boys. It is also important to note that Phoebe identifies the lack of boys on the programme as also being a reason why boys do not see value in it. Given that masculine value was found in sport (predominantly male football), we can also think about the absence of girls/boys as playing a potentially significant role in the inscription of masculine/feminine value, too.

Interestingly I noticed that when girls from Girls High articulated preference for *90210* they described it in ways that suggested it was a 'guilty pleasure'. Meanwhile, at City High, Naomi referred to it as "*stupid and annoying*" (Group Two, Session) with a number of fellow participants (boys and girls) in agreement. This suggests that despite being understood as having feminine value, *90210* does not hold value within the wider cultural context. I argue that this is due to the patriarchal context in which these young people are located. What is feminine may have value, but the extent to which this can confer power is limited. These discourses were not only (re)produced in the discussion of television programmes, but of films, too.

When it came to the discussion of film, discourses of romance having feminine value and thus being appropriate for girls to like were found across the focus groups. Romance was mentioned specifically on just one of the prompts (Prompt 5), and yet featured predominantly in the participants' understanding of gendered taste well beyond this. When discussing a 'typical girl', the feminine value of romance is clearly demonstrated in a conversation at City High. When Phoebe made reference to a 'typical girl', I asked her what a 'typical girl' is:

Phoebe: a typical girl, like how they've been put out, is to watch–
Sara: –like Glee –
Phoebe: – yeah romance and stuff
Sara: chick flicks
Mary: yeah, I'll watch romcoms or whatever, I'll happily–
Lauren: –yeah I know loads that watch romcoms
(City High, Group Two, Session One)

It is interesting to see that with the exception of Mary (and later, Rachel) all of the girls in this conversation distanced themselves from this idea of the 'typical girl'. For example, rather than saying 'girls watch' Phoebe problematises the idea, describing the 'typical girl' in a way that highlights its artifice saying, 'how *they've* been *put out*, is...'. Similarly, when Lauren says 'I know loads' she does not align herself with the position of 'typical girl'. In Group One at City High, Portia also used this way of talking about girls, saying: "*I think a lot of girls like chick flick sort of films*" (Session One). In doing so Portia (re)produces the idea that 'girls like chick flicks' rather than '*I* like chick flicks', and she '*thinks*' rather than '*knows*' indicating that she is not an expert of feminine tastes. This is different to how boys claimed ownership and authenticity over masculinity as demonstrated in their discussions about Chuck Norris, for example. This is an important distinction as it suggests that these girls do not identify with these feminine taste positions, further highlighting the complexity of what femininity means for girls.

However, not all girls distanced themselves from texts with feminine value, demonstrating the complexity of femininity in girls' taste cultures. For example, in a discussion about a prompt-writer who did not like romance texts, Anna stated: "*he*⁶⁰ *dislikes romance films, they are like my thing, I will watch romance films over anything*"

⁶⁰ Anna's choice of pronoun 'he' is interesting as she used it based on the taste articulations given on the prompt which she saw as belonging to a boy – this was strengthened by their dislike of romance (feminine).

(Outskirts High, Session Two). Positive articulations for romance were also taken up by

(some) girls at Girls High:

Primrose: most [girls] like romance films

Melark: it's just stereotypical ... I like Alien Versus Predator

Primrose: yeah but every time you go to a sleepover or something you always watch romance films

Rue: yeah!

Primrose: coz it's like chick flicks

Clove: no actually we watched High School Musical

[laughter]

Rue: that's a romance film!

Bea: that's romance!

[laughter]

Owls: it's cheesy romance but its romance!

(Girls High, Session One)

Although Melark discusses romance as being 'stereotypically' for girls, and does so by asserting her own taste (preferring texts with masculine value), the stereotypes are nevertheless played out in the experiences of her peers. This shows us some of the ways in which although there is diversity in girls' experiences of feminine taste, the discourses that are (re)produced are part of a collective culture enjoyed by these girls (sleepovers). This follows the idea that romance is an integral part of girls' taste. At Outskirts High, Eliza also saw preference for romance texts as being central to girls' tastes, exclaiming "*she doesn't like romance movies, what kind of girl is this?!"*⁶¹ (Session Three). For Eliza not articulating a preference for romance leads to the questioning of this girl's femininity. This statement is particularly noteworthy as it was one of the only instances in which a girls' taste was rendered inappropriate on the grounds that she did not like something that was inscribed with feminine value.

The final instance where I saw the feminine value of romance being used to understand youth taste cultures was in providing an indicator for why girls might like

⁶¹ This pronoun 'she' and the disbelief at the incongruity of their taste was made in relation to their preference for *90210*, a text inscribed with feminine value (as discussed above)

something. For example, when discussing television programme *Misfits* (E4, 2009 – 2013), Troy discusses how it has “*all the romantic girly bits but then it’s got the invisible guy [...] that will kill someone with a doorknob or something*” (Outskirts High, Session Three). The discourses that underpin these assumptions are that romance has feminine value and violence has masculine value (as discussed previously). In a similar vein, we saw in the discussion above about death and the film *Titanic* that the ‘ultimate death’ in it potentially had masculine value, while the romance held feminine value. Through these inscriptions of gendered value participants were able to label particular taste articulations gender appropriate, even if the texts were the same but the genders different. This section has revealed that there was an assumption that a girl’s preference for romance would be gender-appropriate and conform to wider understandings of ‘what girls like’. This is continued in the field of music, where the romantic content of songs was understood as feminine as was the absence of instruments (which was seen to have masculine value).

8.2.2 The Feminine Value in Music

I have previously argued that music’s masculine value is inscribed into the cultural texts that display technical skill. The feminine value in music is therefore *not* located within this area and instead understood in relation to superficial factors such as the gender and attractiveness of the acts (e.g. young, male and ‘conventionally’ attractive). The second reason that music is inscribed with feminine value is if the song or catalogue of the artist is lyrically focused on issues of love and romance (which I have discussed above as having feminine value). In the first instance the attractiveness of the artist was central to understanding if would be appropriate for boys or girls to like. However, this was a much more sanitised version than what I found with masculinity and boys’ sexual objectification (discussed above). When discussing The Beatles, a band that Josh said he would listen to because “*they have good guitars and pianos*” (City High, Group Two, Session One), other

groups discussed their (past) attractiveness (rather than their musicality) to describe why girls liked them:

Mel: I think when they we like big, in the sixties and stuff, probably, maybe women liked them because they were all like handsome and stuff, but now, it's [inaudible] I don't know, I don't think people probably fancy them anymore, coz they're all, o-old and dead and stuff
(City High, Group One, Session Two)

This illustrates the ways in which gender appropriate taste is (re)produced in the discussion of a cultural text that could be 'appropriate' for either of the genders I explore here to like. The feminine value for girls is clearly discussed by Mel as being (or as having been) located in the attractiveness of the members.⁶² Artists and/or their songs could also be inscribed with gendered value if they are centred on love, which is common to pop music (Railton, 2001). What also emphasises the feminine value of pop is that it foregrounds singing and not the playing of instruments (by the act). Without the masculine value offered by the technical skill of instrument playing, singing can be considered feminine in relation. This also follows Ashley's finding that "boys regarded singing as sissy" (2011: 61). I also noticed the feminine value of singing during the exploratory ethnography. Oftentimes during the school day I observed girls singing (during and between lessons), and this demonstrates Willett's (2011) finding that girls sing *much* more often than boys do during school hours.

When thinking about pop music more specifically the feminine value of the genre was also discussed by participants in how it is marketed towards girls. Phoebe suggested that "*it's more put out for girls*" (City High, Group Two, Session One), saying that she thought that because the songs are about relationships they are not for boys. Therefore,

⁶² This discussion also reminds us that these genderings are not fixed and can change over time. The attractiveness of The Beatles explained their appeal to girls *back then*.

through the absence of instruments and emphasis on singing (about romance), pop songs are therefore inscribed with feminine value and thus appropriate for girls but not boys to like.

What this section has illustrated is the ways in which romance is inscribed with feminine value, and is thus seen as valuable and appropriate for girls. However, that such texts were not universally *preferred* by the girls in the focus groups shows some of the complexities of feminine value and its standing within the wider cultural context. That a number of girls distanced themselves from romance texts highlights the wider devaluation of the feminine within a patriarchal context. As I will go on to show, participants' discussions of youth taste cultures reveals that boys and girls experience them very differently. While girls can easily articulate preference for texts with masculine value the same cannot be said of boys and texts with feminine value. However, when it came to the articulation of taste, I found a range of instances where participants discussed modes of articulation as feminine. This helps us to understand how femininity is (re)produced not only through the feminine value that is inscribed into texts, but also in *ways* of articulating taste.

8.3 Girls Tastes and the (Re)Production of Gender Through

Articulation

Although I found few *texts* that were inscribed with feminine value I found that discourses of femininity were (re)produced in girls' taste cultures in other ways. The main area was in *how* girls articulated their tastes, finding that there were particular ways of articulating judgement that young people understood as being unique to girls as thus and holding feminine value. By not only looking at what texts are liked or disliked, but also by examining *how* taste is articulated we can develop a much richer understanding of the (re)production

of gender in youth taste cultures. This provides an important interjection into the taste culture field as it emphasises the significance of *how* people talk about their tastes rather than simply *what* they say.

Broadly speaking the participants discussed celebrity culture and having an opinion on particular celebrities as being something that girls 'do' (and would thus be inappropriate for a boy to 'do'). It is not that celebrities have inherently feminine value, but rather that in talking about and expressing judgements on particular celebrities, girls 'do' femininity. This is because these expressions allow girls to talk about the personal. Knowing about celebrities and displaying interest in the 'personal' was something that was discussed by participants as appropriate for girls and not boys. In most cases there was not a particular position towards celebrity that was understood to be gender appropriate; instead it was quite simply about having an opinion. In general, boys were described as not caring about celebrities, but they could appropriately like a celebrity if they wanted to (the identity pages revealed that they did, and the discussion about Katie Price and Megan Fox showed how). The distinction is that girls are expected to be more interested in the *lives* of the celebrity, or express their feelings about the celebrity with more intensity than boys would. Particular ways of articulating a preference (or dislike) for celebrities, as well as the sorts of reasons for (dis)liking a celebrity, were considered by participants to be gendered. For example, by returning to the case of music, Sara said, "*girls seem to appreciate the people more*" (City High, Group Two, Session One). This is opposed to boys who I have discussed above as being interested in the *skill* of the musician (which holds masculine value). In this section I work through the ways in which femininity is (re)produced in moments when taste is articulated in particular 'feminine' ways. To do this I think about the feminine value that celebrity can hold, before focusing on ways of displaying taste through bitching and 'fangirling'.

8.3.1 *'They all seem to be really targeted towards women': Girls, femininity and celebrity*

Across the focus groups there was an assumption that girls were interested in celebrity culture, despite many of the girls distancing themselves from this position. One of the main reasons that participants thought that celebrities were of interest to girls was because of the ways in which they are 'aimed at women'. For example, Erica said that she thought that boys *could* like celebrities, *"but I think it's more likely that a girl would. Because all those magazines like Heat or Now or whatever, they all seem to be really targeted towards women"* (City High, Group One, Session Two). Pedro agreed, saying that he felt the front cover of such magazines were directed toward women.⁶³ A discussion on the topic of *Loose Women* (ITV, 1999 – present) showed how participants inscribed it with feminine value because it places 'women's problems' at the forefront. As Leticia said, *"it's targeted for women and their problems if they can call it"* (City High, Group One, Session Four). In a different session with the same group, the inscription of gendered value into celebrity through marketing was raised. When talking about pop groups such as The Jonas Brothers and One Direction Leticia described how they're *"really quite feminine, both in their genre of music that they kind of, erm, perform and they are, The Jonas Brothers, I don't think targeted to male"* (City High, Group One, Session One). This was discussed more broadly in Group Two at City High in relation to pop music, where Phoebe said that *"it's more put out for girls I think"* (Session One). When discussing the singer Justin Bieber participants agreed that it would be appropriate for a girl to like him, but not a boy (which follows the findings from the identity pages). Joe explained, *"he's a celebrity targeted at females [...] like, all his designs and logos and stuff are all very feminine and his songs are very targeted towards*

⁶³ It is interesting to see the word 'women' rather than girls used in these instances, suggesting that celebrity culture may be read as part of an older feminine taste culture (but a feminine one nevertheless).

females as well" (City High, Group One, Session One). Bieber is understood as being appropriate for girls as he is mediated with traditionally feminine signifiers. Displaying a preference for such a text would therefore be gender appropriate for girls. Erica describes how a positive articulation for Bieber would therefore be inappropriate for a boy to articulate saying, "*he'd be worried about being too feminine*" (City High, Group One, Session One).

The feminine value of celebrity culture and its marketing towards females reveals only part of how we can understand celebrity playing a role in the (re)production of femininity. Another part of this understanding can be found in *how* participants understand girls talking about celebrity as being distinct and through this (re)produce discourses of femininity. Within these discussions two main areas of feminine articulation emerged, bitching and fangirling. I will first look at bitching to show how discourses of 'girls as bitchy' contributed to an understanding of feminine tastes, before I consider the hyperfemininity that is enacted through fangirling.

8.3.2 The Feminine Value of Bitching

Whenever a relatively large number of celebrities were listed on a prompt, participants discussed that they thought that it would be a girl. This is because they believed that having an opinion on celebrity culture had significance in the lives of girls. I have understood this form of articulation to be 'bitching' as not only did the participants often use this word to describe it, but also because it is a feminine form of talk that emphasises scrutiny and critique (Guendouzi, 2001). Following my poststructuralist position I do not believe that bitching is innate to girls, and I believe boys can perform bitching too. That said, my research shows that a boy's performance of bitching would be problematic, this is because the feminine value of bitching would render the mode of articulation gender inappropriate.

The feminine value of bitching meant that participants understood it as central to the taste cultures of girls. The clearest example of this can be seen in relation to Twitter, where participants discussed it as used primarily for bitching and thus gendered as feminine. This is of note as many of the participants identified computers as being both an object and activity that has masculine value. In the relationship between bitching and Twitter then, we see a gender appropriate means for girls to occupy online spaces. Bitching is therefore the source of feminine value when it comes to Twitter, and this is exemplified in the following conversation:

Sara: Twitter's more of a girls' website—

Lauren: —girls girl thing

Rachel: yeah

Interviewer: why do girls like Twitter more?

Phoebe: because you can rant about anything

Rachel: yeah

Naomi: you can put some sweet quotes that are really disgusting

Sara: and you can follow One Direction and Justin Bieber in Naomi's case

[...]

Mary: don't you spend Twitter like bitching about people? I don't have Twitter so I don't know

[...]

Mary: Naomi you have Twitter, do people, people bitch on Twitter like all the time?

Naomi: not always

Sara and Lauren: yes

Mary: yeah that's a girl

(City High, Group Two, Session Two)

In this conversation we can see that Twitter is seen to have feminine value because of its capacity to provide a space for bitching. The participants also connected Twitter to other texts that were inscribed with feminine value such as One Direction and Justin Bieber, further emphasising its feminine value. When I asked the participants why girls like Twitter more, Phoebe implied that 'ranting' is something that girls like to do (and presumably boys do not). Later on in the passage, Mary who has little experience of Twitter asks whether Twitter is a space for bitching. When Sara and Lauren confirm this, Mary then uses the gendered value of bitching as a means of understanding a preference for Twitter as being

gender-appropriate for girls. This logic was replicated at Outskirts High, where it was less about bitching and more about girls' 'issues' that allowed participants to see the feminine value of Twitter:

Eliza: I thought a lot of girls like Twitter

Anna: I thought every girl liked Twitter apart from Katherine

Interviewer: so are girls more likely to like Twitter than boys?

Anna: yes

Eliza: I see more girls and boys are now *coming* to like it

Katherine: yeah like, girls all got it first and like they're like putting all their *issues* on it

Tom: [sings] *got issues issues issues*

(Outskirts High, Session Two)

Here, the assumption made by both Eliza and Anna was that girls like Twitter, noting that the only example of a girl that didn't like Twitter was Katherine (who often complained the focus groups that she just didn't *get* Twitter). By referring to Katherine they demonstrate that she is the exception to the rule. We also see in this conversation emphasis placed on the word 'issues', implying that this is negative, further (re)producing discourses of the feminine as lesser. The space that Twitter provides can thus be seen as feminine for participants. This is because it allows for the 'working out' of emotional 'issues' that leads it to be inscribed with feminine value. This is important because Twitter's feminine position leads to its trivial position within the context of contemporary youth taste cultures. This is exemplified by Bella at Girls' High, when she says that serious people don't like Twitter because its gossip (Session One), with 'gossip' being another devalued feminine form of expression (Brown and Barwick, 1988). That said, we can see that Twitter may provide a valuable space for girls to practice forms of cultural consumption that may empower them. Thus, the way in which girls both (re)produce the discourses that devalue these spaces as well as identifying the feminine values that they have, the complexity of femininity within contemporary youth taste cultures is demonstrated. In these instances we can see the delicate balancing of dominant (patriarchal) discourses alongside the feminine value that participants may identify within cultural texts.

On the flip side of this I found 'fangirling', a way of articulating taste that embraces the 'hyperfeminine'. Through fangirling (some) girls reject the patriarchal devaluation of femininity and use it in ways that may be gender appropriate but nevertheless confer little value. However, we also see in fangirling a rejection of hyperfemininity, in ways that were mirrored for boys and hypermasculinity.

8.3.3 Fangirling and Femininity

Fangirling is an interesting and emergent concept within youth studies, which has come into being in recent years as a label that has been given to and self-defined by individuals in online spaces. Fangirls have been understood in relation to girls' forms of cultural consumption and media making (see Kearney, 2006), and in particular zine making and the rewriting of texts (Burwell, 2010: 388). However, the way in which it was described and enacted by the young people in the focus groups shows a different version of fangirling taking place within the context of this research. Making sense of these distinctions will allow us to see how fangirling fits into taste cultures, and how by thinking about fangirling as a way of articulating taste we can see a way in which femininity is (re)produced.

As a noun fangirling describes a form of cultural consumption that is highly 'feminine'. It can also be used as a verb (which is what the participants did) that describes a performative act of (hyper)feminine consumption. I understand fangirling, or 'being a fangirl' as something that is inscribed with much feminine value – noted not least in use of the word 'girl'. In its focus on celebrity culture and caring about it, as well as forms of (usually girls' heterosexual) desire for male celebrities, we can further identify the reasons why fangirling is inscribed with feminine value. This develops our understanding of teenybopper forms of fandom associated with girls (see Ehrenreich, 2003; Wald, 2002), to one that plays on these discourses of 'girls as fans' and emphasises them. Thus, while having roots in heterosexual longing and care, from what I observed (and the participants

described) fangirling seemed more about excessive or hyperfandom. In many of the sessions fangirling was described by the girls in the focus groups as a 'guilty pleasure' (further devaluing the feminine) and some said they do sometimes fangirl. In talking about fangirling as something they 'do', the explicitly performative nature of it can be recognised.

In terms of the continued devaluation of the feminine that I observed within youth taste cultures, fangirling is little different. In many of the cases fangirling was deemed trivial and silly compared to boys' articulations of preference. For example, when discussing music Sara notes that "*whereas boys listen to the music, girls just fangirl*" (City High, Group Two, Session One). Sara therefore suggests that girls aren't engaging in the 'important' or substantive aspects of cultural texts. The idea that girls don't engage with the stuff that 'matters' is also referred to by Anna, who describes a hypothetical girl saying "*yeah, coz she'd go all fangirl over them* [mimicking] *oh my god he looks so good!*" (Outskirts High, Session One), placing emphasis of the fandom on appearance rather than the substance of the cultural text. We can therefore see the low cultural value that fangirling is seen to have, despite being something that can be read as having high feminine value. The idea that boys *listen* to the music also further distinguishes girls' and boy's tastes, (re)producing discourses that render feminine preferences as trivial. This has serious ramifications in the (re)production of gender as it shows some of the more everyday ways in which the feminine is discursively devalued within contemporary youth taste cultures.

In two of the groups participants described the actions of fangirls they know. Within these discussions we see some of the ways in which excessive femininity is rendered problematic, mirroring some of issues of hypermasculinity discussed above. The ways in which the participants describe these girls and their actions also illustrates some of the ways in which gender is collectively regulated. The case at Girls High was of a Justin Bieber fan that went to their school. When discussing the girl, participants Clove and Chocoholic

laughed at her for having a life-sized cut-out of Bieber in her bedroom (Session One). At

Outskirts High Chloe, a member of the 'West Side' cohort (of which she was the only

member in the focus group) describes a fellow West-Sider who enacted a form of fangirling:

Chloe: there are still some people who are hardcore, have you seen the person that is kind of laden with High School Musical bag and Hannah Montana P.E. kit and Hello Kitty pencil case?

Eliza: she's in our year?

Chloe: she's in our year

Eliza: is she popular?

Chloe: *no*

Eliza: I can see why!

[Chloe laughs]

Eliza: *all three?*

[...]

Chloe: yeah I wanna slap her

(Outskirts High, Session Two)

The ridicule that this girl received shows us some of the ways in which the articulation of taste (in this case by being 'laden' with specific cultural goods) can lead to being shunned.

When I asked what the case would be if a new person arrived at school and displayed those tastes the participants agree that 'she' would be shunned.⁶⁴ As a means of articulating why

this excess was problematic, Katherine explains "*you can like High School Musical but you can't have like the merchandise*" (Outskirts High, Session Two). Therefore, the way in which

this girl displays her tastes through her school attire is read as problematic by her peers,

reminding us of Thornton's claims that "nothing depletes capital more than the sight of

someone trying too hard" (1995: 12). By laughing at and ridiculing those that fangirl in this

way, all of those that can hear these conversations are reminded not only that the

boundaries exist, but also of the social consequences of overstepping them. This shows us

that similarly with masculinity, too much femininity is problematic, reminding us that the

(re)production of gender through taste is quite distinct from Bourdieu's theories of the reproduction of class.

⁶⁴ Notably I asked about a new *person*, it was the participants that gendered this person a *she*.

The devaluation of the feminine that is enacted by the boys and the girls in the focus group can help us to see that girls are complicit in the (re)production of discourses that render the feminine as 'lesser'. However, it would be inaccurate to claim that the hyperfemininity of fangirling was always inappropriate. In some instances I observed girls in the focus groups rejecting some of the patriarchal discourses by articulating taste using the mode of fangirling. At Outskirts High, Eliza fangirled over British boyband One Direction, bringing them up as a topic of conversation on numerous occasions and displaying significant knowledge of them. As One Direction were not featured on any of the prompts – they had been collected before the band had become famous – Eliza exclaimed “*I really want one of the sheets to come back with One Direction so I can just talk about it*” (Outskirts High, Session Two).⁶⁵ In the case of Eliza we see her embracing fangirling, meanwhile her friend Anna said, “*fangirling’s fun*” (Outskirts High, Session Two). In doing so these girls reject the pejorative status of fangirling and emphasise its pleasurable qualities. Anna also described how her Mum fangirled, highlighting its performative nature. When recalling a family holiday that she has been on Anna said “*my Mum fangirled and actually followed him [Boy George] around the airport until like they spoke and then they spoke on Twitter afterwards, it was pretty funny*” (Outskirts High, Session Three). As an older woman Anna’s mother does not occupy the position of ‘girl’ in terms of many definitions, but she is nevertheless able to fangirl by drawing on these feminine youthful performances that derive from girls taste cultures. This was a story that Anna was proud of too, all of her fellow ‘East Side’ participants has heard the story before, suggesting she has told it to a number of her peers.

⁶⁵ I told participants that they were free to talk about whatever they wanted with regard to culture, but Eliza’s peers took the opportunity to regulate Eliza’s discussion of One Direction by reminding her that they weren’t on the sheet and thus ‘off topic’.

Fangirling draws on and emphasises femininity in the articulation of taste. Fangirling is performative and can be enacted by *anyone*, but unless enacted in specific contexts (as I discuss in the following chapter) it would be inappropriate for boys. I have also noted that the excess of femininity in fangirling means that it can also be problematic for girls as it is *too* feminine. That said, fangirling as a way of articulating taste can be considered political. This is because fangirling allows young people a way of engaging with femininity in a way that subverts the patriarchal systems of value. However, as the discussions of the *High School Musical* and Justin Bieber fan indicate, fangirling is a performance that needs to be carefully presented.

8.4 Concluding Remarks

So far in this I have showed how gender is inscribed into texts that are seen to be valuable to boys or girls. As part of this I have discussed how masculine value and feminine value is inscribed in cultural texts and are appropriate for boys or girls (respectively) to like. I have also thought about how modes of articulating taste are also gendered by young people. In each of these cases I have revealed that excessive masculinity and excessive femininity is problematic regardless of the gender that the person presents as. This has troubled the certainty of Connell's (1995) theory of hegemonic masculinity and offered new dimensions in how we think about gender in contemporary youth taste cultures. However, what I have yet to explore is how gender is (re)produced when particular texts are *rejected* by young people. To explore this I will draw on the conceptions of the masculine and feminine value of texts that I have developed above, and think about the importance of relationality (particularly for masculinity) in the discursive (re)production of gender. I then go on to discuss the potential for transgression in contemporary youth taste cultures, demonstrating the limits of gender during youth.

Chapter Nine

Gender Appropriate Rejections and the Potential for Transgression

What I have shown thus far is the sort of texts that are inscribed with gendered value and why, allowing us to see what boys or girls could gender appropriately articulate preference for. For example, a boy could say that he liked football and this would be gender appropriate, a girl could say she liked romance and this would be gender appropriate. This is because such texts hold value in relation to the gender that they present as and are attributed. By saying that they like these texts they are aligning themselves with a particular gendered position and expressing a form of discursively appropriate gender. In this section I show that there are similar processes taking place in the rejection of texts, and thus I argue that gender is also (re)produced through rejections. I also consider transgressions, showing what may be considered at first glance to be troubling articulations. However, when examined in more depth I show that they are interpreted by participants in ways that reaffirm dominant discourses.

Thus far I have said much about what young people like, but little about the things that they *dislike*. I argued in Chapter Two that consideration of negative cultural judgements can be just as revealing of social (re)production as the consideration of positive cultural judgements. Knowing what has masculine and feminine value means that we now have a better understanding of what is gender appropriate for boys and girls to like and on what grounds they understand something to be gendered. In this final empirical chapter I show that there are also texts that are gender appropriate to dislike. I reveal the way in which boys' rejection of the feminine allow them to (re)produce an appropriate masculinity, while girls tend not to reject the masculine, but instead reject particular versions of

femininity. By rejecting texts inscribed with feminine value boys are able to maintain a (hegemonic) masculine identity that 'matches' the gender they present as. Girls' rejections were more varied, which follows the findings that I have presented so far. Some girls did reject texts with masculine value, but a number also rejected texts that represented problematic forms of femininity such as Katie Price/Jordan. It is important to note that even though both boys and girls rejected forms of femininity, it was often on different grounds, meaning that distinctions between genders were often maintained.

9.1 Rejecting the Feminine

Across the focus groups I noticed that texts with feminine value were routinely rejected by participants. Given that gender inequalities persist under patriarchy, it is not surprising to find that feminine forms are routinely rejected. It has been argued that "[r]enouncing femininity [...] becomes an act of powerlessness, or claiming power for oneself" (Paechter, 2006: 257) and this can help us to understand why I found that femininity was rejected by boys *and* girls. For boys, we can see another motivation for rejecting the feminine in their taste articulations, the maintenance of their hegemonic masculine gender expression.

Motivations for articulating a dislike for texts with feminine value fits our wider understanding of masculinity and how it operates, and there is also wide range of academic literature that has discussed this (as shown in Chapter One). I will therefore begin with my discussion of boys' appropriate dislike of the feminine before working through the complexities of girls' rejections.

9.1.1 Boys Rejecting the Feminine

As we know the sorts of texts that are inscribed with gendered value I do not wish to dwell on what has feminine value and why at this moment. Instead I want to demonstrate how the boys in the focus groups rejected the feminine and how this was played out. To

exemplify this I first draw on some of the discussions that were held about the film/book franchise *Twilight* (2008 – 2012). Here I saw boys actively performing their dislike for the text, often in exaggerated ways. This mirrors the findings of Ging who noted that the boys in her study affirmed their masculinity by distancing themselves from the feminine (2005: 46).

In its focus on romance and love, we can appreciate why *Twilight* was inscribed with feminine value by the participants. In addition to this the aesthetics of the film (sparkling vampires) and the largely female twi-hard fanbase⁶⁶ are also indicative of the film's feminine value. When placing this in combination with the understanding that vampires are usually located within the horror genre, one could argue that there is tension between the masculine and feminine. Relating to this, Larsson and Steiner have argued that "as a vampire romance, *Twilight* can be regarded as a feminine genre encroaching on a masculine subculture [horror]" (2011: 16), and this may begin to explain why it was so readily rejected by the boys in the focus groups.

At Outskirts High, Tom joked that he would bring a copy of *Twilight* to Troy's home, to which Troy commented, "*if he [Tom] came round my house brandishing a copy of Twilight I'd punch him*" (Session Three). When I asked him why this was the case he responded, "*because it's terrible, it's like I can't believe it's not butter, I can believe you brung this into my house [throws air punch] argh!*". In this instance Troy clearly rejects *Twilight*, but does so in a way that uses humour (by interjecting 'I can't believe it's not butter' which plays on a commercial catchphrase) as a means of giving this performance without 'overplaying' masculinity. I believe this wording allows Troy to dislike *Twilight*, and forcefully too, without finding himself subject of ridicule for displaying excessive masculinity (which I have discussed previous as being problematic). In doing so we can see

⁶⁶ We could think of these as fangirls.

that while a version of hegemonic masculinity is (re)produced by Troy, it is one that falls short of fully embracing the hypermasculinity which is understood as being prototypical within hegemonic masculinity theory. Troy articulates a disdain that also represents the problem of 'encroachment' identified by Larsson and Steiner (2011) above, complaining that "*it ruined vampires forever*" (Outskirts High, Session Three). This idea that *Twilight* ruined vampires is one that was discussed by participants in the other focus groups.

Although we can think about these articulations in terms of masculinity, it was not only boys that disliked *Twilight*, as some girls also articulated dislike. That said, some girls *did* like *Twilight*, and unashamedly so, which demonstrates the complexity of girls' taste cultures and what is or isn't appropriate. *Twilight* is just one text that has feminine value that was routinely rejected by boys in the focus group, and the sort of articulation discussed here was exemplary of many boys' discussions about texts with feminine value. Other gender appropriate articulations made about the rejection of texts with feminine value included the rejection of pop songs.

I have argued above that it is gender appropriate for boys to say that they like music that demonstrates a form of technical ability. This display of skill allows the text to be inscribed with masculine value. Music that does not foreground such skills, such as in pop music, was understood by participants to be feminine. The boys' rejection of pop follows the findings of Järviluoma, Moisala, Vilkkö who found that engaging in certain music cultures that are associated with femininity 'endangered' masculinity (2003: 8).⁶⁷ Music is an incredibly broad cultural field and as one might expect it is an equally nuanced area of youth taste cultures. In making sense of these complexities emphasising the relationality of

⁶⁷ Notably Järviluoma, Moisala, Vilkkö argued that preference for music associated with femininity (that has feminine value) meant that the boy was required to be "competent in sports as well" (2003: 8). This follows the findings that I presented above and highlights the importance of consolidating gender inappropriate tastes with gender appropriate ones.

gender is useful as it is the feminine value of some music that appears to reinforce the parameters of taste that is appropriate for boys. This is why it is useful to have discussed feminine value and the grounds on which it is inscribed. For example, for boys, gender appropriate preferences for music is about *not* being interested in the lives of the band members, and it *is* about appreciating the authenticity and technicality of artists and/or bands. By articulating taste in this way discourses of boys' tastes as being 'serious' in comparison to the triviality of girls' tastes is (re)produced. However, as I show in the following section, this devaluation and rejection of femininity is also enacted by girls. However, it was not simply that femininity was rejected outright by the girls in the study; it was a lot more complicated than that. On the whole I found that unlike boys, who would reject texts with feminine value indiscriminately, the sorts of rejections that were considered gender-appropriate were in opposition to particular *forms* of femininity. What I found was that girls were imagined to dislike particular types of celebrity, which falls under the gender appropriate interest in celebrity culture. Girls taste cultures are therefore particularly complex.

9.1.2 Girls' Rejecting the Feminine

For boys and the maintenance of a (hegemonic) masculine identity, opposing texts with feminine value (and that were thus associated with girls) were key. I didn't find the same rejections in the tastes of the girls in the study. Girls did not reject the same sorts of texts that boys did, nor did they reject texts with masculine value either. In general the participants discussed girls' tastes as being much less black and white than they did boys' tastes. What I found instead was that girls did reject some texts with feminine value, and they did reject some texts that had masculine value. These complexities have been alluded to in the previous two chapters. For example, when Melark said that she likes *Alien vs. Predator* (2004) she was not only aligning herself with a text in masculine value, but she

was also distinguishing her tastes from those of her peers who were saying at the time that they liked *High School Musical*. In the teasing and shunning of ‘fangirls’, and in Naomi saying that *90210* was ‘stupid and annoying’, we can see further ways in which femininity has been rejected by girls in the focus groups. This happened at a range of intervals during the collection of the focus group data and is perhaps not surprising given that because of the lack of power afforded femininity it has been argued that girls should avoid it altogether (Halberstam, 1998). Paetcher has claimed that “[r]enouncing femininity thus becomes an act of renouncing powerlessness, of claiming power for oneself” (2006: 257). This can help us to understand why it is that girls are either imagined to reject forms of femininity in their articulations of taste, or why they actually *did* reject them in the focus groups. However, what I found was a much more complex picture, where girls rejected texts that represented particular *versions* of femininity, meaning that a relatively coherent version of non-masculine girls’ tastes were nevertheless (re)produced. Working through these complexities is the issue to which I now turn.

Many of the focus group participants believed that girls dislike (female) celebrities that they see as actively vying for the attention of males. Examples that emerged at countless intervals across the focus groups in discussions were celebrities such as Katie Price/Jordan and Megan Fox who I have already discussed as playing an important role in masculine taste cultures and the appropriate tastes for boys. Although there was an implication that such celebrities would be appropriate for boys to like (as discussed above), many of the discussions also focused on why girls specifically *dislike* them. That it was discussed as appropriate for girls to dislike such celebrities also follows the discussion made previously about girls, whereby bitching was seen to hold feminine value in youth taste cultures.

Generally, participants focused on Katie Price's looks and claim to fame as a means of making sense of why it was that girls don't like her, following the wider understandings of why Price has come to be read as a 'worthless' celebrity (Holmes, 2005: 13). The most common criticism girls made about Katie Price were based around her appearance, that she was 'fake' and 'thinks she's pretty but she isn't'. The role that appearance plays within femininity helps us to understand how in making these taste articulations, the girls are also making a comment on the sort of femininity that they align themselves with. Meanwhile, with American actress Megan Fox, participants tended to think that the only reason for liking her would be in (hetero)sexual terms. Given that participants couldn't imagine girls as lesbians and engaging with the sexual objectification of women in this way indicates the marginalisation and invisibility of lesbian as a sexual orientation within youth culture. As a means of teasing out the distinctions in how both Price and Fox were understood as gender appropriate for girls to dislike, I focus first on Price and think about how her forms of femininity were seen as problematic, before thinking about Fox's objectification.

That female audiences don't often like Katie Price is not the most surprising given that it has already been documented in the academic literature (Tyler and Bennett, 2010; Skeggs and Wood, 2008), so what is interesting here is that we can see how younger audiences negotiate this dislike, and how it plays a bigger role in the (re)production of gender. In a lot of cases there were very broad claims made about 'girls' and their dislike of Katie Price. For example, at Outskirts High Eliza simply said, "*girls hate Katie Price*" (Session Three). There is little nuance in how girls tastes are understood here. There are no 'most girls I know' nor 'a lot of girls' nor is there an 'I don't like Katie Price', instead by saying 'all girls' Eliza demonstrates how central she believes disliking Katie Price is to girls tastes. Eliza was not the only participant to speak in such terms, for example at Girls High Primrose said "*girls hate her*" (Session One); Rue emphasised that "*girls hate her*" (Session Two); meanwhile at City High Sara said "*girls don't like her*" (Group Two, Session Four).

Discourses of gender appropriate taste are therefore (re)produced when such comments are made, as what girls are expected to think about Price are clearly conveyed by the (female) participants in these instances.

When I asked the participants to reflect on why it was that they thought girls don't like Katie Price a number of them focused on her appearance. This idea was encapsulated by Troy, who described Price as "*proper plastic, like uncanny valley too clean*"⁶⁸ (Outskirts High, Session Three). Although Troy, a boy, made this articulation (showing the nuances of taste), the overwhelming emphasis was placed on how it is girls that dislike Price. In discussing why this is participants at Girls High had the following conversation:

Primrose: girls hate her because she's *fake* she hasn't done *anything* to deserve celebrity

Bella: I think girls dislike her because they just think she's a fame seeker

Primrose: she is

Bella: like she's not that pretty

Primrose: she's not

Bella: and she's gone too far

Primrose: she has

Clove: I don't think she was pretty to start with!

[laughter]

(Girls High, Session One)

In this conversation an amusing pattern of expression took place, with Primrose affirming Bella's statements about why it was that girls don't like Katie Price. In the opening stages of the conversation Bella is less certain about her theories, saying 'I think'. Meanwhile, Primrose *is* certain, cutting in to close down Bella's theories on Price and girls' dislike of her. Generally participants tended to think that Price's artificial appearance was problematic for girls, suggesting that authenticity in the aesthetics of appearance are considered to be important for these girls.

⁶⁸ The term 'uncanny valley' describes the dip (or valley) of comfortableness, whereby as "robots appear more humanlike, our sense of their familiarity increases until we come to a valley" (Mori, 1970: 33)

One of the commonalities between why celebrities such as Price and Fox were seen as being appropriate for girls to dislike can be seen in their sexualisation. As part of this there were some conversations about how boys like to 'look' at Price, which meant that in being appropriate for boys from a heterosexual position, they were equally inappropriate for girls. I have discussed the appropriateness of boys' preference for such celebrities in greater depth above and so I do not wish to dwell on it here, but Joe did discuss how he believed that girls dislike celebrities such as those because they are 'jealous':

Joe: it's a bit, girls, get a bit competitive about looks I think, well, obviously, I don't know, but, you know, but erm, yeah, I think, from what I've seen, if you said something nice about one a girl to another girl she might get a bit competitive about it. If you make it, yeah they get a bit competitive about looks. I think that certain area. If somebody said something about a guy, I don't really get competitive of other guys.
(City High, Group One, Session One)

I would like to note that Joe was not 'corrected' by any of the girls in the group after making this comment. This may say something about the position of power that he holds in the group or it might mean that what Joe was saying was not something that the girls wanted to contest. Nevertheless, this was also suggested as a theory by Sara in a discussion about Katie Price:

Sara: boys might dislike her because they think she's fake but then girls don't like her because she's *pretty*
Mary: she's not pretty at all
Sara: no but some people think she is
(City High, Group Two, Session Four)

In this group however, Sara's theory that Price is disliked by girls because they're jealous is disputed by Mary, and would also go against Primrose and Bella's conversation above.

What this shows us then is that although all of the participants are in agreement that it is

appropriate for girls to dislike celebrities such as Fox and Price, *why* this articulation is appropriate is not clear to them. It is thus interesting to note that the participants did not overtly discuss celebrities such as Price's sexuality as a reason for disliking her despite a few participants referring to her 'slag' side. For example, when discussing the distinction between Katie Price and Jordan, Sara remarked "*her slag side is Jordan isn't it? And like Katie Price is when she's not being a whore*" (City High, Group Two, Session Four) to which Lauren responded "*which is never*". Similarly Tom used the word 'slag' to describe how she looks (Outskirts High, Session Three). Given that sexuality has been considered to be a central force within contemporary girl cultures, (Ringrose, 2011; Tolman, 2009; Kehily, 2004) that it was rarely discussed is of interest. These findings that show that disliking celebrities such as Katie Price is a gender appropriate taste articulation, and this also shows that girls respond to glamour models a lot more critically than previous research may suggest (Coy and Garner, 2010).

What I have shown in this section is the complex way in which gender appropriate taste is understood by young people in terms of what *not* to like. However, in examining what young people don't like and how it is gendered I have revealed the systemic devaluation of the feminine that takes place within contemporary youth taste cultures. In terms of gender-appropriate rejections for those that present as boys, more or less anything that can be seen to have feminine value can be appropriately rejected. Meanwhile when it comes to those that present as girls I did not find an equivalent rejection of the masculine, I also did not find an equivalent rejection of the feminine either. Firstly it should be noted that there were not many rejections that were necessarily considered appropriate for girls to dislike, and this fits with the findings that I have presented of the diversities of girls tastes. However, the one articulation that I have revealed to be gender appropriate for girls is to say that they dislike is glamour celebrities such as Katie Price and Megan Fox. I believe that we can see the rejection of a particular type of femininity which is defined

through its sexual objectification. This is an important distinction as it is not the case that we see girls disliking *all* femininity which is implied in the assumptions made about appropriate taste for boys. I have argued that it is not surprising that girls reject some forms of femininity as femininity holds little cultural or social power, but I have not yet said much about how femininity is negotiated by boys. In this final section I focus on transgressions, and think about taste cultures as a potential space for the queering of gender. The argument that I make is that girls have a lot of potential to queer in their tastes, and this follows all of the findings that I have presented thus far. It is a lot more complex for boys, and so I think about the texts that hold feminine value and how they are discussed. I also think back to some of the findings I presented in Chapter Five about the youth taste cultures and the consequences of inappropriate articulations of taste, thinking about the importance of context. Through this I think about how and when otherwise 'gender inappropriate' taste articulations can be 'appropriately' made. On the whole then, I show that gender transgressions in youth taste cultures are few and far between.

9.2 Transgressions?

I have revealed much about what is or isn't considered gender appropriate by young people in this study, but I have yet to discuss what happens if and when a gender inappropriate articulation is made. Can such an articulation ever be accepted in the hyper-regulatory space of the high school? What I aim to do in this section is to think about the moments where gender is transgressed in taste articulation. Transgressions can help us to better understand the complexities of the (re)production of gender in contemporary youth taste cultures. When I talk of gender transgression I am referring to the moments of incongruity, when gender attributed and taste articulated do not 'match' and thus the stability of gender is troubled.

A significant factor in the transgression of gender is gender attribution, the process that Kessler and McKenna (1978) discuss as being when one decides if someone is a 'male' or 'female'. I believe that it is significant because gender can only be transgressed in expression if there has been an agreed upon gender identity in the first place. McGuffey (1999) has argued for the existence of a 'gender transgression zone', a space where people transgress the boundaries of what is gender-appropriate. McGuffey's findings are similar to those posited here, that "girls cross over more than boys and receive fewer sanctions for gender deviations" (1999: 617), but I disagree that gender transgression takes place in a 'zone'. Instead I believe that gender transgression can take place anywhere and at any time. To work through the nuances of gender transgression in taste articulation I first examine the gender-inappropriate taste articulations of those that present as girls. I argue that the frequency of girls transgressions raises questions of whether girls can really 'transgress' gender through taste articulation at all. This is juxtaposed against transgressions for boys, which is a much more regulated domain. For boys there were much clearer consequences for transgression.

9.2.1 Girls and Gender Inappropriate Taste

One of the main things that I found in the taste cultures of participants that presented as girls was that they often articulated tastes that were understood to hold masculine value. Glimpses of these sorts of articulations have been seen above and my discussions have also shown rejections of the feminine. In each of the groups there was at least one girl that was keen to demonstrate her preference for texts with masculine value and distance herself from the feminine. These were Anna (Outskirts High), Leticia (City High, Group One), Melark (Girls High) and Naomi (City High, Group Two). This suggests that the discourses of what is gender appropriate for girls are broad. In this section I refer to some examples that demonstrate how the participants articulate and/or respond to 'inappropriateness'. I

generally find that the gendering of texts doesn't necessarily matter to girls and thus we can't really conceive of the articulation as a transgression.

Evidence of girls articulating preferences of texts with masculine value was widespread across the focus groups. If members didn't say that they liked things like horror films, guitar bands or sports, they could certainly imagine other girls that did. As a means of exemplifying this I discuss the case of Anna and Naomi, who discussed liking football on numerous occasions during the focus groups. That Anna and Naomi in their respective groups talked about how they liked football so much suggests that this is something that they felt they needed to reiterate. This indicated to me that they were aware that their preference for football was not a 'normal' articulation for a girl such as themselves to make. In reiterating their preferences they may have been compensating for the discourses of 'football as masculine', and thus primarily in the interests of boys. Anna often reminded her peers in the focus groups that she was a season ticket holder for the local premiership team and talked about the recent games that had taken place. Naomi on the other hand talked about how she had 'seen all of the games' of the Euro 2012 tournament (as discussed above), complaining that the boys she had talked to about it hadn't. I did not find that their peers problematised their tastes, leading to their being 'shunned', and I believe this is largely the case because the things that have masculine value have broader cultural value. It is interesting to note then that the participants found a means of reading a girls' preference for football that does not transgress or trouble the discourses of femininity.

Eliza: well if you're a girl trying to get known with boys, on an attraction level then the whole knowing the sport would be, if you can talk about football I can see you've got loads of, obviously it doesn't always work for some people
[Anna pinches her, group laughs]
(Outskirts High, Session Two)

This demonstrates the complexity of gender because although the feminine is generally devalued by the participants we can see that in this instance it is still used in the sense-making of girls' tastes. Based on my understanding of them as individuals, I think that both Anna and Naomi would be quite upset that their tastes could be dismissed as a means getting a boyfriend. It nevertheless shows us though that a girl's preference for football is read as suspicious and thus not wholly accepted in terms of the dominant discourses of gender. What Eliza's reasoning does is to therefore reconceptualise gender-inappropriate taste in line with dominant discourses.

The regulation of girls' tastes does occur then, but takes place in relatively innocuous ways and this may be a way of maintaining the gender hierarchy. Masculinity could be read as potentially out of bounds for those that present as girls. Girls' claiming the power conferred through masculinity by making masculine taste articulations (for texts with masculine value) therefore has its limits. This can also be seen in a conversation that took place during the 'Matching-Up Exercise', where it was revealed that one of the prompt-writers (that articulated preference for a number of texts that were understood to have masculine value) described herself as female. In this instance participants problematised such investments as a 'try-hard' attempt to 'get down with the boys' and were thus read as inappropriate. This further demonstrates the ways in which some transgressions in girls' tastes *are* discursively regulated by some of the group members, despite appearing all-accepting of girls' tastes.

Leticia: I think it's a girl that thinks she's kind of into boy things

Erica: yeah!

Reuben: yeah! She *thinks* she's into boy things

Leticia: yeah, but actually, reality check!

Erica: she's trying to seem cool or something

Pedro: [in American accent] *reality check sister!*

(City High, Group One, Session Four)

This conversation shows us how gender transgressions through gender inappropriate taste articulation are rendered problematic. They can only be rendered problematic *if* there are discourses of appropriate taste, and in moments such as these we can see quite clearly how these discourses are (re)produced. Unlike with McGuffey's (1999) findings we can see here that I did not find that boys 'patrolled' girls' presence in the boys domain while girls did not, but instead found that both boys *and* girls from the group (re)produced discourses that rendered this girl's taste as being gender-inappropriate. It is thus also interesting to note that Leticia takes centre stage in ridiculing this girl despite being one of the group members that often articulated preferences for texts with masculine value, demonstrating the complexity of gender in contemporary youth taste culture. The focus group participants discuss the cultural value of 'boys things', theorising that the girl is aligning herself with them in order to try and 'seem cool'. In making these claims the discourses that normalise an understanding of the masculine as being culturally valuable are (re)produced. Thus while Halberstam (1998) or Paechter (2006) may argue that girls should avoid femininity and align themselves with masculinity because that is where the power is, in reality this transgression appears much trickier for girls. I found that on the whole girls *could* make masculine taste articulations, and certainly their gender identity as 'girls' were not problematised, but nevertheless their tastes could still be scrutinised on the grounds of gender. In any of these cases it seems that gender inappropriate taste articulations by girls would probably not lead to the shunning of a girl, and girls' did not appear wary of making gender inappropriate taste articulations despite some of the repercussions described above. I also want to note that I found no accusations of girls with masculine tastes being labelled lesbian, something that has been found when girls transgress the rules of what is gender appropriate in relation to the body (McGrath and Chananie-Hill, 2009). Given that there was often conflation with gender and sexuality made by the participants (as detailed in Chapter Six), I found that gender inappropriate tastes for girls (if it can even be termed

this due to the fluidity and space within what is appropriate for girls) did not lead to the labelling of the girl (negative or otherwise) as being a lesbian. This represents a notable distinction in how taste cultures are experienced differently by those that present as boys and those that present as girls.

Because these gender inappropriate taste articulations were made so often, I question the extent to which they can be understood as transgressive at all. It seemed to me that there was no 'shunning' experienced by the girls that participated, although there was the odd bit of ridicule for the girl discussed as 'trying to be cool' for liking boys things. Either way, this seemed to not have long lasting or 'serious' consequences. Even here this seemed to be less about their femininity being 'wrong' and more about the girl's attempt to claim the power of masculinity conferred by the texts with masculine value. As I argue in the following section, this is experienced very differently by boys.

9.2.2 Boys and Gender Inappropriate Taste

I have said much the cultural power of masculinity and how participants had a clear sense of what was appropriate for boys to like and the sorts of texts that have masculine value. Within these discussions I have demonstrated the centrality of hegemonic masculinity within these experiences. What I have yet to comment on then is what happens to the boys that do not articulate preferences for sport or genres of music that emphasise musicality, and instead reject them. Would deviation from the discourses 'boys like sport' or 'boys appreciate instruments' lead to them being shunned? For boys to transgress gender they would need to not only reject the masculine, although according to Paechter to do so would be about "giving up power, symbolically, if not in practice" (2006: 256), but these boys would also need to articulate preference for the feminine, something that has been found to be widely devalued.

The sorts of things that are problematic for boys to say they like are things that they understand to have feminine value. This is because if boys say that they like feminine things then their gender expression becomes feminised through this alignment, and I found that when this happens their sexual identity is often read as gay. As I showed in Chapter Six, this is significant because 'gay' remains a problematic label in the hyper-regulated context of high school. I found in the focus groups that boys that articulated preference for feminine texts were mocked, often through homophobic means. In other instances I found that humour and other everyday forms of regulation (re)produced a somewhat narrow understanding of appropriate masculine taste for boys. It is also useful to give a reminder that participants also mocked 'too much' masculinity, so boys are walking a relatively fine line of appropriate taste. Broadly speaking then, there was much evidence to suggest that in the younger age group of 14-year-olds, a much less inclusive masculinity than those evidenced by Anderson (2009) and McCormack (2012) was experienced.

One of the places in which I saw transgressions of boys' appropriate taste being rendered problematic was during the 'Matching-Up Exercise', where the prompt-writer articulated preferences for a range of texts that participants understood as having feminine value. When I revealed to them that the person described themselves as male the participants made some fuss, looking shocked and gasping and they kept repeating the texts that had feminine value as if to say 'this is not what boys like'. In Group Two at City High a few members of the group put their hands to their mouth or threw their heads back in shock. These sorts of bodily reactions remind all present of the parameters of 'appropriate' taste. There were also verbal comments that were made that mark the boundaries of appropriate masculinity for boys. For example, after making some noises of disbelief a number of them kept asking me 'really?!' as if I must have made an error. In response to this I asked Group One at City High:

Interviewer: if this person said they liked all of these things at school
Erica: I think they'd get teased, I think it's quite sad but they would
[pause]
Leticia: yeah
Pedro: nah, they'd fit in with the crew!
Leticia: oh ho ho ho ho
Reuben: in what crew?
Erica: leave them alone!
Leticia: so awful!
(Group One, Session Four)

Something similar happened at Girls High, where participants gasped and said 'no way' and 'really?!' a lot. Clove went as far as to say "*that's so wrong*" (Girls High, Session Two).

Interestingly they commented on the combination of feminine texts, suggesting that the odd out of place one would be okay:

Melark: if it was just like one of the televisions I like you *might* be able to get away with it but *all* of them
Primrose: it's just so strange
(Girls High, Session Two)

Outskirts High was the only place where explicit reference to his potential sexuality was made, where Tom flounced his hand and the others agreed 'he had gloves on', which appeared to be a peer group joke which was used to describe a male that is gay.

When participants discussed boys' transgressions of gender-appropriate taste, in many cases the individual's sexual orientation was a central factor in how they imagined him. Participants discussed that gender inappropriate taste articulation could be made by someone that was gay – and thus abandoned the pursuit of hegemonic masculinity. The significance of a feminine taste articulation made by a boy is usefully captured by a dramaturgical metaphor described by Goffman, "a single note off key can disrupt the tone of the entire performance" (Goffman, 1959: 60). In such instances the 'off note' could potentially lead to a boy being shunned. However, I found that if a consistent number of

keys were 'off' then a boy's feminine expression of gender could be accepted by the wider group. For example:

Phoebe: if they were known for being like that though being like that though, liking girls shows

Sara: if they were like camp or gay or something yeah from day one

Phoebe: yeah

(City High, Group Two, Session One)

Nevertheless what we see here is the conflation between feminine taste and gay sexual identity. A boy that transgresses gender appropriate taste would be understood to be gay, regardless of whether or not he is. This is significant because I have found that being labelled as gay is still problematic, and that the hyper-regulated space of high school is still a relatively homophobic one. Being labelled gay is not something that boys can easily shake off. At City High Phoebe discussed that a gender inappropriate taste articulation made by a boy that would want to maintain a masculine identity ('manly boy') would find himself facing difficult circumstances:

Phoebe: it depends on the person and if people knew that they liked that sort of thing but if it was like a proper manly boy and then they said it then they would probably would get bullied
(City High, Group Two, Session One)

What I found to be a consensus across the groups was that boys should avoid making any transgressive taste articulations should they want to present themselves as masculine and not be labelled 'gay'.

I did however find *one* way that boys could transgress gender appropriate taste *and* maintain their masculine identity. This was able to occur if boys articulated their preference for something with feminine value in a playful manner. These were transgressions that I observed the participants articulating in the focus groups. Such

articulations only appeared to be accepted by the wider group because the boys that made them had already 'proved' their masculinity by articulating a number of gender appropriate tastes. This has important implications for how transgressive we can understand these articulations to be and how inclusive we can think of youth masculinities as being. For example, when taken at surface level the acceptance of gender inappropriate taste articulations appears to support inclusive masculinity theory. However when the bigger picture is taken into account, we can see that hegemonic masculinity was never really challenged because the boy had already established an acceptable and accepted masculinity through other means.

There were two boys that I witnessed making transgressive comments in the focus groups and these were Joe at City High (Group One) and Tom from Outskirts High. An example of Joe's transgression (and his were much fewer in number than with Tom) took place in a discussion about music. In this conversation the singer Lionel Ritchie was mentioned. Joe used a way of talking about Lionel Ritchie that drew on feminine forms of expression saying, "*I just think he's romantic and dreamy*" (City High, Group One, Session Two). When the response from Leticia was "*ahhh*" signalling her acceptance of his comment, Joe quickly corrected himself, saying "*I don't actually like, I was just joking. I feel bad now*". Because Joe so quickly corrected himself (showing self-regulation) he recouped the transgressive elements of his articulation. That said, Leticia didn't laugh or make fun of his response and I believe that this is because she didn't take it seriously. This is because Joe had already fixed his masculinity through his previous articulations and his heterosexual displays with his girlfriend (who would usually walk with him to the focus group sessions). In the case of Tom, however, he did not mention a girlfriend nor did I witness him with one before or after the sessions, and with Tom I believe we see a more fluid performance of gender. In Tom's moments of transgression, humour played a big role. Tom would often make comments in funny voices or pull faces and this partly connected to

his role playing the class 'joker'. One of the recurring articulations that he would make was his preference for the television programme *Glee* (Fox, 2009 – Present) which was inscribed with feminine value in all of the focus groups. Tom would mention *Glee* continuously until his peers acknowledged it. In two of these occasions he described how he was temporarily 'shunned' for saying he liked it (Outskirts High, Session Two). I believe that the reason Tom was able to articulate potentially transgressive tastes was because his masculinity was never in doubt. Although his transgressions were meaningful, given that they were made in the hyper-regulatory space of high school and had the discursive potential to put his masculinity at risk, I believe his emphasis on humour meant that he was demonstrating how "one member of a team performs his part for the special amusement of his teammates" (Goffman, 1971: 185). The other members of the focus group often laughed Tom's performances, appearing to enjoy them. A further reason why Tom's transgressions were not rendered problematic was because he was a basketball player demonstrating his masculinity through sport and thus 'buying immunity from stigma (as argued by McCormack, 2012: 50). Additionally, having grown up in London he often used vocal codes that referenced cultural signifiers of 'tougher' urban masculinities and his Filipino heritage marked him as visibly different to his predominantly white peers (both in the focus group and school context more broadly). Therefore in the overwhelmingly white context of Norfolk, Tom's non-white masculinity, coupled with his Londonness marked him as 'masculine' through the connotations this form of toughness has with hegemonic masculinity (as also discussed by Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman, 2002). Given that Tom would often mention being from London as well as being 'the only Asian in the school' on countless occasions in the focus groups, I believe that these are identities that Tom is proud of and keen to display. Therefore although Tom transgresses masculinity on occasions, I argue that his masculinity was never truly in doubt.

When it comes to articulations of taste that could transgress the masculine expectations of boys I found that this didn't really happen. The potential transgressions were reined-in in order to fit with the dominant discourses of (hegemonic) masculinity. In one case, the consequences of transgressing gender appropriate taste was seen when participants responded to the prompt-writer that articulated feminine tastes. In this instance the boundaries of acceptable taste were re-affirmed by the participants. That Erica said she believed the boy would be bullied if the boy articulated those tastes at school is telling of how regulated boys' taste cultures still are. It shows that homophobia and fear of being labelled gay remains a problem when it comes to boys' experiences of masculinity. Furthermore, this is not something that I found to be experienced by girls, showing that gender appropriateness is experienced very differently by boys than it is girls.

9.3 Concluding Remarks: Understanding the Differences Between Boys' and Girls' Tastes

What I have found is that although the discursive meanings and values of tastes and cultural texts are unfixed, they are nevertheless stabilised by young people. This leads to taste cultures being experienced differently by those that present as boys and those that present as girls. They are experienced differently because what is appropriate for a boy is different to what is appropriate for a girl. I found that boys' tastes were more regulated, with boys needing to demonstrate gender-appropriate taste as a means of ensuring their masculine gender expression is not troubled. The motivation to (re)produce dominant discourses of (hegemonic) masculinity can help to ensure that they are not labelled 'gay', an identity still unable to confer power or status with the context of school. The way for a boy to articulate gender-appropriate taste is to say that he likes texts that have masculine value. Though analysis of the focus group discussions I found that what is understood to have masculine value is still heavily connected to stereotypical hegemonic masculinity. For

example, participants inscribed masculine value into texts that represented sports, violence or allowed for the performance of heterosexual desire. I also found that in knowing this, young people could find masculine reasons for liking something that may otherwise be relatively gender neutral. For example, in a discussion about the television programme *Misfits*, participants discussed how it was appropriate for boys because it offered the representation of violence, and appropriate for girls because it represented romance. While the discourses of gender may be temporarily stabilised they remind us that the gendered value of cultural texts is not fixed, and is (re)produced in each moment. In terms of feminine value then, this was a much more complex area and reflects a range of issues that girls confront. What was understood to be feminine was routinely devalued by participants of all gender and the taste articulations of girls were rarely taken seriously enough to lead to social problems for the girl. That said, this meant that girls were able to enjoy much more freedom than boys in their taste articulations. In fact at Girls High, the participants cited the absence of boys as an explanation for why they felt so free in their articulations of taste:

Bella: this is going to sound really bad but because we're all girls

Clove: we don't really care

Rue: there's no pressure

[...]

Owls: also there's no boys to impress

[...]

Interviewer: so you think it makes a difference if there are boys around?

[agreement]

Melark: a *lot* of difference

Bella: because I think it puts pressure between girls groups as well

Owls: yeah

Primrose: there's less, it's more concentration on what you look like than education whereas here I'm not saying you don't have any like thought about what you like and things but, like it's, it's not like uncool to like a lesson or something, if you like, if you don't suddenly think they're sort of a bad person or something or weird person or something whereas at other schools I think boys would be a bit like

Clove: *ooh*

[laughter]

(Girls High, Session One)

Of course I did find the regulation of taste taking place at Girls High, fangirls were ridiculed and some tastes were labelled as problematic. There are also likely to be classed elements here too as Girls High is private while rest of the schools were in low socio-economic catchment areas. Nevertheless, it is significant that the girls see the absence of boys as being a primary reason for why they felt so free in their taste articulations.

On the whole, girls didn't really need strategies to articulate preference for texts with masculine value because girls were able to be relatively free in their taste articulations. However, I have argued that this is as not as positive as it may sound, because this freedom is only able to be enjoyed because femininity has been found to hold such little value in contemporary youth cultures. For boys this was not the case. Boys' tastes were much more rigidly focused around ideas of what is or is not gender appropriate. Participants had a clear sense of what has masculine value and what does not, and through this hegemonic masculinity was foregrounded. However, this too was not straightforward. Too much hegemonic masculinity was also found to be a problem and so young people need to ensure that they have good balance in their taste articulations in terms of gendered value.

What I have shown in this section is the nuanced ways in which gender is (re)produced in contemporary youth taste cultures. I have showed that the articulation of taste is different for those that present as boys and those that present as girls, and this is due not only to ideas of masculinity and femininity, but also due to the values masculinity and femininity are seen to hold more generally. In the patriarchal context of youth, I discovered that the feminine is systematically devalued by both boys and girls, and only rarely in instances such as fangirling, do we see young people (almost always girls) embracing femininity. Texts with masculine value however was something that boys and girls articulated preference for, and I argue that this is because masculinity confers value during patriarchy. The hyper-regulatory space of high school therefore (re)produces gender

as notions of gender inappropriate taste mark the boundaries of who and what young people can be when it comes to terms of gender.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This thesis came about because I was interested in how gender has managed to be such a pervasive social category within our lives. I wanted to explore how young people, the generation of tomorrow, (re)produce gender in their everyday experiences. Astonished at the lack of research that considers taste in relation to gender I therefore set out to explore the ways in which gender is discursively (re)produced within contemporary youth taste cultures. The rich empirical evidence that I have collected has been revealing, and what I have found is that youth taste cultures are very much a site where gender is (re)produced.

My concern is not necessarily that gender persists as a binary, although this certainly impacts those that identify outside of it, but rather than in the (re)production of gender we see the (re)production of gender *difference*. At the moment, gender limits who and what we can be. I hope that through this thesis I have showed the usefulness of examining youth taste cultures (and taste cultures more broadly) in understanding the complexities of gender (re)production during youth.

In this thesis an in-depth exploration of youth taste cultures has been achieved. This has involved talking to young people talk about the texts that they (dis)like, the gendered value that they inscribe into them, and the perception of for whom they are appropriate. By talking to young people and placing their experiences at the forefront of this study I have developed a rich understanding of the complexities of youth taste cultures and young people's gendered navigation of them. I have showed that gender is discursively (re)produced when taste is articulated. Because cultural texts can be, and are usually inscribed with gendered value then there is such a thing as gender (in)appropriate taste. My argument is that gender appropriateness only matters, and is thus only regulative, because gender is understood by young people to operate in the binary, and so an idea of

what is appropriate is based on the grounds of this. This is important because in the hyper-regulatory space that is high school, *not* articulating gender appropriate taste can lead to one's tastes being rendered problematic. Therefore, I posit that taste (re)produces gender because tastes are collectively regulated through discourses of gender appropriateness.

In this final reflection I consider the contributions this thesis has made to the field of youth gender studies, bringing together the rich empirical evidence examined in Sections Two and Three in line with the theories outlined in Section One. As part of this I reflect on the limitations of this study as well as pose questions for how this research can be developed in further areas of scholarship.

Identity (Re)Production in Contemporary Youth Taste Cultures

This study has found that although young people have diverse tastes, they nevertheless have a very clear understanding of what taste articulations are gender appropriate and what are not. I have focused on the intersection of gender and age, and in doing so revealed the ways in which young people assess the tastes of others their age, using their understanding of what is gender appropriate. A central contribution of this thesis comes from its empirical approach, foregrounding the voices of young people to ensure that the understanding that is developed is one that has emerged from the *direct* experiences of young people. In total, 112 people aged 13-16 from the Norfolk region took part in the study,⁶⁹ with 34 of these being involved in up to four focus group sessions where collective meaning making was foregrounded. Through this I have shown that there are clear and known parameters of what is gender appropriate, and these discourses of gender appropriateness are (re)produced through taste.

⁶⁹ In addition to this a further 28 were observed during the exploratory ethnography.

Understanding Identity

In Chapter One I made my case for a poststructuralist account of identity, I argued that identity is (re)produced through discourse. I claim that identity is (re)produced because it is *produced* in the moment of performance and it is *reproduced* because it relies on the existing discourses (even if transgressive). I have drawn broadly on Foucault to argue for the importance of discourse in producing subjects, but have taken my greatest inspiration from the work of Butler (1990) and Goffman (1971). Through reference to these works I have been able to make sense not only of the importance of gender performativity but also of the role that the audiences of these performances play. Thus while Butler contributes to my understanding of the former, through the work of Goffman I have been able to argue for the importance of the latter. I believe that the audience plays a significant role because it is the audience that judges the appropriateness of a performance of identity and this is something that I have explicated through empirical analysis. In making this theoretical argument this I drew on the work of Evans, who claimed that although Butler offers an account of gender as 'a doing', Goffman's understanding of performance, agency and the audience provides nuance when understanding the complexity of gender (re)production (Evans, 2006: 550).

Although meanings may be temporarily stabilised, they are never fixed and thus my interest has been in how young people collectively (re)produce ideas of what gender means (and thus *is*). Wood has argued that "[e]mpirical research has struggled with how to conceive of subjects in [poststructuralist] theoretical terrain" (2009: 111) and this research has certainly involved grappling with these complexities, but I hope that I have demonstrated the usefulness of taking this challenge on. This is because I have been able to show the means through which young people stabilise gender as an identity in their discussions of gender appropriate taste. I found that within taste cultures young people

have a clear sense of what texts mean and for whom they are appropriate, and it is in these discussions that we see the discursive (re)production of gender.

I discussed in Chapter Six how young people are invested in the gender binary despite showing awareness of the possibility for alternative gender identities. This demonstrates that despite there being 35 years difference between my study and that of Kessler and McKenna (1978) I have found that the young people continue experience their gendered words in binary. I have argued that this is important because if gender is understood as binary then this limits who and what young people can be. Indeed, when discussing the identity page respondent that described themselves as an inbetween, participants were keen to know what gender the person 'really' is. The consequences are that if young people understand gender to be discoverable and attributable to individuals (on the basis of binary), then gender *matters* to young people. When we combine this with the findings presented in Section Three, where I found how participants inscribed cultural texts with gendered value (rendering them appropriate or inappropriate for their peers to like on the basis of their gender), then we can see the significance of gender within contemporary youth taste cultures.

Youth Taste Cultures and Hyper-regulation

Youth taste cultures are at the heart of this thesis and I consider them to be a central space where young people work out what identities they can (re)produce. In my account of the field of youth studies I have argued that for many years now scholars have been interested in the cultural lives of young people, with many focusing on their consumption practices, and Bennett (2011) offers a useful overview of this. However, I was surprised to see so few studies examining taste cultures more specifically. One of the contributions of this thesis is therefore to highlight the significance of examining youth taste cultures in developing our understanding of young people's lives. The findings in this thesis are significant as they

show us that youth taste cultures are a site where gender is (re)produced and regulated. Within taste culture theory, much of the literature has followed in the footsteps of Bourdieu, with many studies examining the cultural reproduction of class through taste. Meanwhile very little has been said about the (re)production of gender (with studies such as those presented by Skeggs (1997; 2004b) providing important exceptions). Another contribution of this research has therefore been to ask questions of the cultural (re)production of gender within taste. A large part of developing this understanding has been as a result of my use of the concept of value. Within this conceptualisation I argue that value is inscribed into objects and expressions of taste on the grounds that they are seen to *mean* something for the person that aligns themselves with it (or against it). *Gendered* value is therefore the value that is inscribed into objects or expressions of taste on the grounds that they collectively understood to mean something to a person of a particular gender. The gendered value of cultural texts leads to the (re)production of gender through the assumption that some texts are seen as valuable to particular people in terms of gender. As a social phenomenon, the concept of gendered value can help us to explain how ideas of gender appropriateness functions within everyday culture. My findings clearly demonstrate that taste cultures *are* experienced differently by those of different genders, and taste can be rendered (in)appropriate on the grounds of gender too. It is my hope that this thesis will inspire future research to undertake interrogations into the (re)production of a range of identities in taste cultures.

Bryson (1996) has argued that much of the contemporary taste cultures literature has focused on the things that people like, rather than the things that they do not like. This thesis has addressed this by ensuring that the things young people disliked like were given as much focus as the things that they liked. This was significant because I found that there were a range of gender appropriate *dislikes* for young people, such as boys disliking near enough anything that has feminine value, as well as girls disliking particular types of

celebrity (such as sexualised ones like Katie Price in particular). This data was available to me because I ensured that at the methodological development stage dislikes were given equal space to likes on the identity pages (which were then used as prompts in the focus groups). In Section Three I detailed how, for the young people that I spoke to, the tastes of an individual could easily be rendered (in)appropriate. An example of this can be seen most clearly in boys' tastes, as it was important that a boy liked something masculine, because if he articulated a preference for something with feminine value (such as a romantic film) then he would likely find his masculinity problematised. This is only experienced as a problem because if a boy does not display masculine tastes then he may be called gay, which I found was still an issue within the context of my sample group. Again, it's important to reiterate that the participants believed that being in high school was central to why they felt so restricted, and this is why I have emphasised that high school is a hyper-regulatory space. Understanding high school to be hyper-regulatory is significant because this is what makes gender appropriate articulations so necessary to young people's everyday experiences of taste, especially in terms of the gendered parameters of acceptability.

As I have suggested above, one of the reasons that taste cultures were found to provide such an important role during youth was because of the hyper-regulatory space that I found school to be. I argue that it is hyper-regulatory due to the high number of young people and their repetitive daily routines, where they move in cohorts and thus spend sustained periods of time together. In Chapter Five I analysed the empirical findings that revealed why taste mattered in youth culture, and through this I showed that young people are all too aware of the consequences of inappropriate performances. When the taste articulations of a young person are rendered gender inappropriate, they risk being shunned. I have argued that the word shunned is a useful one for thinking about discursive regulation and for this reason I would like to see it integrated into academic vocabulary. The word shunned, used by the young people in this study, can help us to understand the

consequences of failing to (re)produce gender appropriate tastes. It describes a collective form of social rejection and so it's useful for describing the processes that I either witnessed happening in the focus groups, or that the participants said they had experienced. When asked to talk about how and when shunning occurred, participants at Outskirts High provided examples that showed both verbal and physical forms of punishment, with the verbal 'spreading it' to be the worst. Fear of being shunned therefore provides motivation to perform gender-appropriate taste in a context that is hyper-regulatory. In terms of taste cultures, I have revealed that high school is a unique space, and I encourage further research to explore taste within this context.

An original contribution to the research can therefore be seen in my interrogation of youth taste cultures. Through examination of the literature I have found that not only is youth taste a vastly underexplored field, but it is also an incredibly rich one for academic exploration. Young people's discussions about taste may appear mundane and inconsequential, but I argue that they are not. Not only can we learn much from everydayness of youth taste cultures, but more importantly we can see the central role youth taste cultures play in the (re)production of identity. Because youth taste cultures are regulatory spaces, through their examination we are able to develop an understanding of how discursively 'regular' identities are (re)produced in taste articulation. This thesis has placed focus on the intersection of gender and youth, but the framework that I have developed can certainly be used to investigate the (re)production of other identities, and I would encourage further work to do so, taking seriously the role that taste plays in the lives of people.

Taste and the (Re)Production of Gender

Broadly speaking the identity pages revealed the sheer diversity of tastes within youth cultures, and this was detailed in Chapter Four where I analysed the responses to the

identity pages. This raised questions about how young people could make sense of such diversities. If anything it suggested that taste was open to all, and that cultural texts were not understood differently in terms of gendered value. Through this one might deduce that taste cultures are therefore not experienced differently by boys and girls. However, such a deduction would not account for the sophisticated means through which young people read and understand taste as gendered. Despite appearing diverse, participants had a clear sense of what the tastes meant in terms of gender, and were able to confidently navigate the tastes on the prompts that I gave them. Through the analysis of these discussions I have been able to show why it is so important to speak to and engage with young people through empirical investigation, as it is here that we are able to appreciate the complexities of their cultural lives.

I found that taste cultures *are* experienced differently by young people that present as male and that present as female. This is because I found that participants (re)produced gender when they talked about for whom cultural texts would be appropriate to like. Cultural texts were rendered appropriate or inappropriate to like because young people inscribe them with gendered value. As part of this exploration I have revealed that boys' tastes are much more heavily regulated than girls' tastes are, and this is largely because masculinity and femininity are understood as having different values. I have found that taste articulations are often rendered inappropriate on the grounds of gender, and that cultural texts have gendered values (with femininity largely devalued).

I think it would be fair to say that a common theme across the findings that I have presented is the lack of straightforwardness when it comes to gender in youth taste cultures. In disconnecting masculinity from being inherently about maleness, and femininity from femaleness I have been able to show how young people discursively (re)produce gender. In asking questions about what is feminine or what is

masculine, alongside what boys do and what girls do, I have been able to show how young people negotiate the parameters of gender. This research therefore develops the works by Francis (2010; 2008) and Paechter (2012; 2007; 2006) who have argued that there has been a conflation not only between sex and gender, but also between gender and gender expression within academic research. Rather than simply assuming that girls' tastes are automatically *feminine* tastes I have been able to offer a rich account of young people's gendered experiences. What I have found to be significant is that in youth taste culture the gender one is attributed is the gender to which one's articulations much 'match', and this is particularly important for boys. The reason that I have argued this is more important for boys are twofold. In the first instance, the masculine is seen as having *value* (across genders), and the second reason is because those that are boys are discursively associated with masculinity they have more to lose by distancing themselves from it. Comparatively, when it came to girls' tastes greater fluidity was discussed. However, I argued that the cost of this was the discursive devaluation of the feminine. One of the strengths offered by examining youth taste cultures is that they offer a space where we are able to see the complexities of these relationships.

I found that when discussing boys' taste cultures, hegemonic masculinity was the most appropriate and unproblematic gender identity for boys to perform. I found that texts were inscribed with masculine value and were thus understood to be appropriate for boys to like if they either represented or allowed boys to perform hegemonic masculinity in their articulation of taste. Cultural texts tended to be inscribed with masculine value on the grounds that physicality and heterosexuality, proponents of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005), were represented. But of course boys' taste cultures are more complicated than that, and I found that while hegemonic masculinity was certainly the form considered most appropriate, it was also the case that 'too much' of it would also be a problem. In Chapter Seven, I was therefore able to draw on empirical evidence to show that hegemonic

masculinity certainly occupies a complex position in the lives of boys (and indeed girls). What I have shown is that Connell's hegemonic masculinity theory posits that the properties of physicality and heterosexuality (amongst others discussed in Chapters One and Seven) are desirable, and in this research I have found that its desirability has its limits. My empirical analysis has certainly showed the significance of hegemonic masculinity in the appropriate taste articulations of boys, but that this relationship is far from straightforward.

Looking specifically at issues of boys tastes, and of masculinity, the findings in this thesis contribute to the lively debates that are currently taking place within masculinity studies (see Haywood and Mac an Ghail, 2012, for an overview). In my discussion of the academic literature in the field of masculinity studies in Chapter One, I showed that the theorists of hegemonic masculinity theory (Lusher and Robins, 2009; Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman, 2002; Connell, 1995) have found their work being placed under increasing scrutiny from theorists of inclusive masculinity (McCormack, 2012; Anderson, 2009). I have argued that there is *potential* for boys to have a more fluid relationship with masculinity and their performance of it. However, I found that through discussions of appropriate taste and the fear of being shunned in the hyper-regulatory space of high school, this potential was almost never realised. For example I discussed in Chapter Five that some of the boys discussed 'being yourself' with friends, and thus being 'honest' with what they say they like. This suggests that there may be spaces for inclusive masculinity when it comes to boys taste cultures. However, my discussions in Chapter Seven revealed that there was a clear sense of what was appropriate for a boy and thus I discussed in Chapter Nine that transgression rarely occurred. We can make sense of why it is that transgression is particularly problematic due to the context discussed in Chapter Six. Here I showed that the sexual identity 'gay' was often conflated with instances of non-traditional masculinities being displayed by boys. I found that the label gay was one that, while not *entirely* problematic, was one that boys that were *not* gay were keen to avoid. Fear of being

homosexualised therefore allows us to see that the young people in this study are located in a context that Anderson has conceptualised as 'homohysteria' (2009: 95). Fear of being labelled 'gay' can therefore reveal much about how and why I found the pervasiveness of hegemonic masculinity within the taste cultures considered gender appropriate for boys.

When it came to the analysis of girls' tastes, I found masculinities and femininities to be negotiated in highly complex ways. And thus while not straightforward, I argue that girls taste cultures are not straightforward for different reasons to boys. In terms of what was considered appropriate tastes for girls, I found that almost anything 'goes'. This was also largely what I found in Chapter Four where there was a great diversity of texts mentioned by those that described themselves as girls. I argue that this is because girls, in their presented and attributed gender as female, are understood as the people for whom femininity is appropriate. However, I found that the feminine has very little value within contemporary youth taste cultures. This has given girls considerable freedom when it comes to their expressions of taste, as generally speaking they have very little to lose. However, it is not simply the case that girls rejected the lesser value of the feminine, nor did they see it as valuable to them (as girls) and align themselves with it.

Traditional concepts of femininity were drawn upon when describing the properties of texts that hold feminine value. I found that texts that represented love and romance were often the ones that participants discussed as being valuable to girls – and simultaneously inappropriate for boys. However, on the whole, the girls that articulated preferences for these sorts of texts tended to describe them as a 'guilty pleasure', while many of the girls rejected them on the grounds that they had little value to them. Unlike with texts that had masculine value, outside of the texts that represented romance, few were understood as having feminine value, and I have argued that this is because the feminine is generally not described in terms of wider cultural value in youth cultures.

Instead, I noted that the feminine was less about the texts themselves, and more about the *means* of articulating taste. Within this I have been able to argue that it is important to examine not only what is liked or disliked in youth taste cultures but also *how* these tastes are articulated. For example, in Chapter Eight I found that bitching was considered central to the assumption that girls are interested in celebrity culture, meanwhile 'fangirling' offered girls a means of performing excessive femininities. This raises a range of interesting questions about the role of *articulation* in taste cultures, not least in terms of the (re)production of gender. It seemed to me that despite appearing diverse, and although there were a wide range of appropriate articulations, an understanding of femininity in girls taste cultures was nevertheless (re)produced.

This thesis has therefore revealed that although femininity may address the qualities of being female (Thomas, 2008), what is acceptable for girls is much broader than the 'feminine'. This is because I found at various intervals girls 'appropriately' articulated preference for texts with masculine value, and I also noted them saying that they dislike texts with feminine value. Girls are therefore able to articulate tastes in the same way as their male peers. But boys were found to be significantly more regulated than the girls. These findings show that youth taste cultures are spaces where girls can potentially perform masculinity, further contributing to the understanding that has been developed of this in recent years (Francis, 2010; Renold, 2007; Paechter, 2006; Halberstam, 1998). Thus, while boys taste articulations are discursively regulated on the grounds of appropriateness, the same cannot be said for girls. In thinking about how broad girls' tastes have been found to be within the empirical evidence collected in this thesis, we can come to understand how the concept of 'girl' has come to be so slippery and indeterminate (Harris, 2004a). One of the reasons for this may be due to the subordinate position that femininity occupies in relation to masculinity, making it less than desirable to align with. This understanding has

only been possible through the direct engagement that the methods employed in this thesis have provided.

Reflections and Future Research

When I started this research, I did not know what I would find, but I did know that I wanted the voices and experiences of young people to be at the forefront of my analysis. The methods that I have developed and employed as part of this research demonstrate my commitment to this and I am proud that my research has been tailored to the specificities of the youth experience. Through this I feel that I have been able to capture the richness of young people's cultural lives.

I have used methods that placed the youth experience at the forefront of the collection of empirical evidence. This is the first study, of which I am aware, that empirical evidence has been collected through the use of online identity pages. These pages were carefully designed to ensure that the collection of data was both fun for the respondents but also able to answer the research questions that I posed. By using identity pages as prompts in the focus group discussions I was able to ensure that the participants were responding to the 'real' tastes of people their age. In Group One at City High, Leticia even commented that the tastes given were 'subtle' and thus 'realistic', which is unlikely to be something I would have been able to achieve should I have fabricated the prompts myself. I believe that new media offers great potential in empirical research, particularly when combined with traditional methodologies such as focus groups. I hope that researchers take inspiration from the richness of data that I have collected here and employ these methods in the future.

There are however limitations to this research. In the process of undertaking this study I have been forced to focus on particular areas and not others. A benefit of this is

that I have been able to develop this rich understanding of gender and youth taste cultures, but this also means that there are absences in this research, particularly in terms of intersectionality. In acknowledging these absences I show the need to consider intersectionality within future research. Despite a relatively diverse ethnic sample (in relation to the geography of the investigation), I have chosen not to elucidate issues of race. Similarly, I have not reflected on class, and given class's centrality within studies of taste this may be considered a weakness in my research. Undoubtedly class plays a central role in how taste is experienced; the countless studies that follow in the footsteps of Bourdieu have found this to be the case. I hope that I have demonstrated well enough why I have chosen not to look at class in the thesis. It is not the case that I believe that class or race (or any other social identity) are less important than gender or age, but rather that I think that they are categories that are much too significant to mention only tangentially. I believe that to mention them while not really grappling with their complexities would be to the detriment not only of my research, but also to the complexities of these identities. Skeggs (1997) has shown what insight can be garnered from a focus on gender and class when looking at taste, but my research has never sought to mirror that of Skeggs'. My research questions were instead focused around questions of gender specifically, seeking to uncover the complexities of gender within contemporary youth taste cultures. It is my belief that to ask questions of class, race or ability would not only mean distracting from my focus on gender, but also to pay a disservice to the complexity of these intersecting identities, too. There is great scope for future research to interrogate these intersectional identities in relation to taste cultures, and I urge such work to be undertaken.

In this thesis I have analysed gender and youth taste cultures from a poststructuralist perspective, attempting to queer accounts of gender in the process. Gill has argued that meaning is "fluid, ambiguous and contradictory" (2007: 13) in poststructuralist theory and this highlights one of the difficulties of applying this

perspective within empirical study. However, just because meaning is never fixed, it doesn't mean that it can't be temporarily stabilised. What I have shown in this thesis is that through the gendering of cultural texts and gendered appropriateness, an understanding of what gender *is* and *means* is temporarily fixed for young people. Presenting these empirical findings has therefore been challenging. I have argued, as Francis (2010: 478) has done, that when categorising different behaviours/tastes/texts as gendered then we run the risk of reifying gender binaries. I am constrained not only by the inherent gendering of English language, but also by the need to 'fix', if only temporarily, my analysis of gender onto the pages of this thesis. I hope that in my discussion of boyness and girlness, masculinity and femininity I have been able to stay true to my poststructuralist position. I have shown, I hope, that masculinity and femininity are ideas and expressions that can be picked up by any body, and they can be performed by any body. However, I have shown that despite this potential for transgression, young people rarely do transgress, and this is because they are fearful of being shunned within the hyper-regulatory space of high school. Although all of the participants presented as cisgender, and their expression of gender matched their presentation of gender, my belief is that the theories I have developed here could certainly be applied to trans, non-binary and queer young people. In the case of queer youth, the examination of taste and how the articulation of taste can trouble gender would provide a fascinating site for further study and I would encourage it to be undertaken. Similarly, an investigation with trans youth could help us to understand how taste articulations can fix gender.

As a feminist researcher I am both grateful that we have a better understanding of how the feminine continues to have a lesser value within youth cultures, but I am nevertheless disheartened to find that this remains the case in the current day. I do believe that there is a need for further investigation into how the feminine is devalued in discussions of taste. It is problematic because femininity is associated with girls, and this

connects those that are attributed the gender girl with a lower cultural position. Is it any wonder that I found so many girls (and boys) rejecting the things that are associated with femininity when the femininity is seen to confer such little value? This thesis therefore provides empirical evidence to support the claims that Paechter has made that distancing oneself from the feminine is about the claiming of power (2006: 257). In light of this research I am keen to undertake further study into the devaluation of the feminine, particularly as I did find some moments where participants embraced the hyperfemininity offered by fangirling. In such moments, the complexity of gendered value is raised, and we are given reasons for further interrogating the role that femininity plays within youth taste cultures.

The final area that I would like to reflect and provide suggestions for further research is in relation to age and the hyper-regulation of taste. The participants in this study discussed how they felt that their position in high school was central to their experience of regulation in their tastes. I noted in Chapter Five how they felt that as they moved into adulthood the things that say they like would have lesser impact on how those around them respond to them. It would therefore be interesting to see if this is in fact the case. This could take the form of longitudinal research, investigating the same group over time, or running a study with a similar framework to this one with members of other generational groups. McCormack's (2012) findings from his study with Sixth Form aged boys (16-18 years old) suggests that the feeling of regulation eases for boys, with a greater range of (non-hegemonic) masculinities being accepted. However, while perhaps not *hyper-regulatory*, I would be cautious of saying that it is not regulatory at all. It is my belief the plethora of spaces that adults occupy are subject to discourses of appropriate taste and are thus little different to those experienced by the participants. We often hear comments of 'office politics' or something similar at many adults' places of work and so I do not doubt that the parameters appropriate tastes are (re)produced in these spaces too. Silva and Le

Roux (2011) and have even found that in intimate spaces such as in in (heterosexual) relationships, adults partners have an impact on how they view their tastes and what they articulate. I believe that the (re)production of gender through discourses of appropriate taste happen at all generational stages, and given that there has been very little research that I could find that investigates this issues, there is much academic work in this field to be undertaken.

Final Remarks

It is my belief that the politics of taste is fundamental to how we can understand the discursive (re)production of identity. Persistent inequality is experienced on the grounds of identity, (sexism, racism, homophobia and ableism, to name just a few), and through the interrogation of taste cultures we are able to uncover the everyday ways in which these differences are (re)produced. This research, like much other audience research, is so important because it renders “problematic taken-for-granted ideas and beliefs circulating in society about gender” (Carter and Steiner, 2004: 28). It is my hope that through this research I inspire future audience studies to examine taste cultures, as this study has shown its usefulness for examining these taken-for-granted ideals.

My motivation was not only to develop our understanding of the role that taste plays in the (re)production of gender (a much overlooked field within the academic literature), but also to develop our understanding of why gender persists as a cultural category. The richness of the empirical evidence that has been collected in this thesis has allowed me to develop this understanding. This thesis has demonstrated the importance of considering the role that gender plays in the experiences of taste. I am not saying here that gender is the only, or indeed the most important element in the discourses of appropriate taste, but what I am claiming is that we must not overlook the integral role that gender plays in how young people negotiate their taste cultures, both individually and collectively.

I have found that when young people talk about the things that they like, they (re)produce gender. Gender is regulated within contemporary youth taste cultures because discourses of gender appropriate taste remind young people of the parameters of what articulations are permissible. I have showed that because school is a hyper-regulatory space, and because young people fear being shunned, they have motivation to articulate appropriate taste. I hope that this is the first research of many that considers the role of taste in the (re)production of gender, unravelling the discourses that hold them together in the process.

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