

**THE REST IS STILL UNWRITTEN:  
FEMALE ADOLESCENTS' CULTIVATION OF GENDER FROM MTV'S  
REALITY TELEVISION SERIES *THE HILLS* THROUGH CELEBRITY GOSSIP  
BLOG COMMENTARY**

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study is to research cultivation effects of gender represented on MTV reality television series *The Hills* on adolescent female bloggers. Gerbner's cultivation theory structures the background of this study. By conducting a textual content analysis of various filter blog sites from November 1-30, 2008, this study will unveil personal opinions relating to the reality of constructed gender representation and authenticity of *The Hills* as a "reality" television program. Blogs provide an ambiguous platform for individuals to immediately express opinions, judgments and attitude concerning the program; therefore, this study will be a contribution to the expanding field of convergence and "new media." Although comments on the websites are critical of *The Hills* characters and their depiction of "reality," the television program has a dedicated audience, calling for the reevaluation of "fandom." Cyberspace offers an opportunity for virtual dialogue among viewers, as well as a platform to express cyberfeminist rhetoric. Women and girls are gaining new social and organizing space, claiming a new form of power and shaping media and society through particular kinds of participatory communication.

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## CHAPTER 1 - Introduction

Television is an influential medium for affecting popular culture in society. A paradigm shift in programming at the beginning of the twenty-first century introduced a new found popularity in reality television. While there have been few shows of this nature on-air before this time (for example, *COPS* (1989-present) and *America's Most Wanted* (1988-present)), the theme was generally crime dramas; however, the reality television craze explored various premises to create programming to fit multiple categories. Inexpensive production and lack of costly Hollywood salaries made reality television a fruitful option for network television stations. In the summer of 2003, the four major broadcast networks scheduled no fewer than twenty five reality programs, and every major cable channel was experimenting with at least one (Hall, 2006).

MTV focuses on producing shows for a younger audience, the station's target demographic. The network appeals to middle class white heterosexual viewers to gain programming ratings and statistics. *The Real World* and *Road Rules* specifically market to teenagers and college crowds. With success of these programs, the network continues to market reality television shows to this audience, as well as younger viewers. There are currently twenty-seven reality programs broadcasting on the channel, not including various re-runs of previous shows (MTV.com). These shows "reflect Generation 'Why Not?' — living, working and playing on their own terms, 'adventure capitalists' if you will, pursuing a variety of thrill-seeking, 2.0, express-yourself enterprises," says MTV entertainment president Brian Graden (Rolling Stone Online, 2008, p. 1).

In 2006, series on MTV began to reflect different audiences in relation to gender and established *The Hills*, a soap-opera inspired dramatic reality series following the life of protagonist Lauren Conrad. It should be noted that this reality show portrays life through the lens of white heterosexual upper-class urban lifestyles, circumstances that some viewers may find vary from their identity and daily routines. However, more research is needed to determine if audiences are employing the television show for the gratifications of fantasy and escapism or see a reflection of reality in the lives of *Hills* characters. The cameras follow a primarily female cast (late teens through early twenties)

through their everyday lives filled with shopping, gossiping and relationship woes. Male figures are overshadowed by female characters and their feminine storylines. In an audience analysis from September to December 2008, data revealed females 12-34 comprised 48% of the MTV audience, which supports the argument that *The Hills* is directed towards female viewers and audiences (Weprin, 2009). This research is not intended to create binary containers for “male versus female” audience members or participants, but instead to unpack the layers of content and societal epistemologies provided by mass media.

Harris (2005) claims that “with digital cell phones, blogs, vanity surfing and reality shows, Generation Y have become absorbed with itself” (p. B9). The characters on *The Hills* are extraordinarily attractive, exhibit excessive spending habits and have seemingly effortless connections with highly sought after companies. Furthermore, television has been able to produce market and sell its celebrities from scratch with the help of multimedia outlets (Turner, 2006). Conrad and friends have been featured in countless magazines, blogs and television specials radiating celebrity status despite being “average teenagers.” While these lifestyles are advertised as “real” and relatable, do audiences accept or reject the authenticity of *The Hills*?

Briggs (2007) explains that “Electronic media is a complex web of illusion, consumption and fantasy targeted towards teenagers” (p. 40). Fans and critics have stormed cyberspace to offer commentary on an array of topics and interests. This step of applying convergence media allows a community to now interact and communicate on an open platform: blogs. Unlike other mediums, such as print or digital video, blogs are instantaneous and promote user feedback. Cyberspace adds a new avenue to the field of media studies.

As female adolescents foster individual identity, girls constantly look to the culture around them, from family to popular media, for guidance (Williams, 2006). This research is interested in whether or not the reality program *The Hills* serves as a compass for success or achievement for adolescent girls or if it is simply constructed around traditional patriarchal gender roles in society. Because patriarchy is a tool of power in society, media mirrors dominant paradigms of female subordination and unachievable expectations. Additionally, are female bloggers creating an alternative space for gender

and feminist discourse? Further research is needed on the notion how female audiences are interpreting and applying these messages.

Female youth leisure (in this case, television viewing) functions in a private, domestic 'bedroom culture' centered on heterosexual romance and the consumption of mainstream cultural commodities (Kearney, 1998). MTV's *The Hills* could be an authority in shaping present white middle-class girlhood culture. This research is crucial in order to find factors that shape youth culture (specifically females) and how girls are interacting with the material. This study can be further investigated to discover the influence of television on behavior changes and the cultural studies of adolescent female representation in cyberspace.



## **CHAPTER 2 - Literature Review**

### **Youth and Girlhood Cultures**

Primary studies regarding the creation and transformation of youth culture have been researched at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, focusing on the emergence of socioeconomic classes and the influence of capitalism (Hall & Jefferson, 1975). The surfacing of youth subcultures in England was heavily studied as a new trend challenging the authority of everyday life (Hebdige, 1979; Fyvel, 1963). Teddy-boys, Mods and Punks were dissected to discover not only how, but also why innovative music, fashion, literature, art and language were reinvented by each group to form a distinct identity that rivaled social norms. One factor noticeably absent from the literature of subcultures was the presence of females. McRobbie (1991) argues that there are many reasons why girls were not prominent in these subcultures, such as the presence of public violence, the negative connotations of being a female associating with such masculine groups and responsibilities at home expected to be performed by girls; however, girlhood culture was created in an alternative and private way unlike that of their male counterparts.

Adolescent females have created cultures and communities to establish an identity. Race, class, sexuality and other components of identity allow multiple connections, but unfortunately can also serve as roadblocks for acceptance from dominant hegemonies; however, this is true for any subculture. For example, young lesbian women of color have diverse cultures that work outside of privileged mainstream society. One cannot place “adolescent girls” under a single umbrella and assume similar relatable experiences. Butler (1990) believes that biological sex (female or male reproductive organs) guides gender performance of femininity or masculinity, which is based on stern cultural expectations. This concept was initially elaborated and described as “doing gender” in routine interactions by the highly cited West and Zimmerman (1987). Commonly, this is represented through a sociobiological framework as an established phase of natural, physical, and psychological flux (Harris, 1999).

The surfacing of bedroom culture became an important site for leisure and learning due to changing patterns in family interaction, reduction in family size and the popularity and strong consumer power of youth culture (Bovill & Livingstone, 2001).

Bovill (2000) explains:

Equipping the bedroom with TVs, audio and computer equipment represents an ideal compromise in which children are both entertained and kept safe. Two in every three have TVs in their bedroom, including half of 6-7 year olds. As young people spend more time in their own rooms, media become less central to the family but more important among friends, with whom TV is a shared experience. From around 9 years children's bedrooms become important to them as a private space and new media especially are welcomed for the entertainment value as well as symbols of status. (p. 1)

Media is now an even more important tool for creating societal expectations and influencing personal agency. During this time, girls are looking to gain control and responsibility for managing their bodies, sexuality and emotions (Harris, 1999). Because this stage is primarily spent at adult managed institutions (i.e. home and school), girlhood culture is created by how one presents herself as a social category marked by age and activities, such as dress, speech, and leisurely entertainment (Schlegel, 2000). Items used in free time are usually relatively cheap (such as music, magazines and/or television) and commonly associated with the specific age group. Through various forms of media, girls find direction for maturity and society's expectations, as well as outlets to release various forms of budding identity. Girl culture works both in the mainstream and underground; while some may choose to support dominant societal beliefs (possibly due to naïveté), other girls may reappropriate messages to fit their own rhetoric. "Outside" groups (persons of color, gays and/or lesbians, those impoverished or disabled) may heavily rely on this method to create and personalize space in cultures. While girls are shaped by media, they can also redefine and alter dominant ethos.

Specifically aimed at female consumers, forms of media (for instance, women's magazines) are ideologically constructed to teach dominant female traits based on beauty, romance and the domestic sphere (Bocholtz, 2001). Britney Spears, for example, was a carefully manipulated marketing image that transformed the "girl-next-door" into a sexy vixen from the early age of seventeen (Reichert & Lambiase, 2006). Spears was a wildly

successful pop icon that girls imitated and boys yearned after. Girls are taught to be good consumers of products that will in return make them culturally acceptable women, believing that media mirrors society. Pop-star posters on bedroom walls, beloved television series, and key fashion influences combine as a text for the influence of media on girls (Bovill & Livingstone, 2001). This identity is shared with other females (who hold similar race, class and sexual statuses) to produce a shared girlhood culture working together for a common goal of maturity.

The mid-1990s found an influx of the cultural identity and mantra of “Girl Power!” in media specifically targeting young and adolescent girls. With the Spice Girls on the radio, *Clarrisa Explains it All* on television and *Queen Bees and Wanna-Bes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and Other Realities of Adolescence* as a bestseller on bookshelves, a new surge of commodity feminism was available for girls (Banet-Weiser, 2004). Commodity feminism, playing off of Marx’s “commodity fetishism,” occurs when “feminist ideas and icons are appropriated for commercial purposes, emptied of their political significance and offered back to the public in a commodified form – usually in advertising” (Donsbach, 2008, p. 1). This shift in ideological perspectives of girl-oriented media is a result of the popularizing of feminist ideas and the representation of feminists working in cultural industries (Kearney, 2002). Girls were encouraged to participate in group league sports to establish teamwork and break traditional gender roles to gain empowerment. This movement incorporated girls working together as a force to be recognized rather than ignored. Pro-girl rhetoric attempted to create another feminist movement for a younger generation commonly referred to as “third-wave.” Girls were represented in media spotlights and marketing campaigns that milked the “Girl Power!” motto as a fad. This important era for girlhood culture opened the door for adolescent visibility in society rather than directly imitating adults.

The representation of girlhood in *The Hills* should be examined to witness current trends and changes in American girls’ youth culture. The ways in which girls create meaning and assimilate core themes and concepts from the show may explain a change in gender rhetoric. Girls are assaulted with popular cultural images and messages that lead to an obsession with physical appearance, fashion, heterosexual sex and relationships;

this pressure can generate multiple problems, like eating disorders and depression (Williams, 2006). The images decoupage identity, affecting both political ideologies and gender roles.

### **Television Media**

Television previously had the power to make youth rebel against an established social order, both as empowering and destructive (Bodroghkozy, 2001). The post-World War II baby boom insured a rising trend in popular teenage culture, claiming a population of ten to fifteen million during the 1950s and twenty million by the 1970s (Osgerby, 2004). It is also important to note that after World War II was the emergence of rock and roll music in popular culture, especially prevalent in youth culture. “Rock and roll is not only characterized by its musical and stylistic differences; it apparently can be used in radically different ways by different fans” (Gossberg, 1983, p. 104). From 1955’s *Rebel Without a Cause* to 1966’s squeaky-clean *Beach Blanket Bingo*, there was a kaleidoscope of images and morals expressed in mass media toward adolescent audiences. With this large population demographic change came higher school enrollment, younger participation in job markets and increased teenage consumer power.

Television, both broadcasters and advertisers, started addressing this youthful audience in an effort to profit from a newfound market. Teen-centered shows, such as *Teen Twirl* (1955) and *American Bandstand* (1957), used trends in music and dance to attract viewers, appealing primarily to young females (Osgerby, 2004). Popular family sit-coms (*Leave it to Beaver*, 1958-1963; *The Donna Reed Show*, 1958-1966) began to incorporate teenage characters, quickly leading to the development of adolescent-focused television series (*The Patty Duke Show*, 1963-1966; *Gidget*, 1965-1966). As this once-teenage bracket matured and demographic trends declined in populations (and spending habits), television also transformed (Osgerby, 2004). Between the 1970s and 1980s, there was a significant absence of youth programming on network television.

The 1990s did bring a rise to teen television culture once again, thanks to the children of baby boomers. Dramas, like *My So-Called Life* (1994-1995) and *Beverly Hills 90210* (1990-2000), discussed controversial, real life topics for teenage audiences. Sexuality, pregnancy, drugs and youth delinquency all served as examples of the

consequences that could come as a result of leading a teenage life. Although these had always been concerns for adolescents, a stronger advocacy for the topics to be publicly addressed developed with the promotion of progressive voices, from both youth and feminists. Many of the values of the ‘hapless kid seeking direction’ are indistinguishable from those adopted by mainstream adult culture (Philo, 2000). This is an important alteration in mass communications that promoted public discourse and awareness of real-life situations (albeit described as “touchy” at times) in a progressive manner. In 1995, a new television network was specifically created to cater to teenage viewers: the WB (Clark, 2004). *Dawson’s Creek* (1998-2003), *7<sup>th</sup> Heaven* (1996-2007), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), *Gilmore Girls* (2000-2007) and *Felicity* (1998-2002) were all featured on the channel and attracted primarily adolescent female fans (Clark, 2004). The station (later changed to the CW Network) is still primarily a teen programming station.

While reality television programming was featured on selected networks, it did not become a saturated trend in the United States until 2000 with the introduction of *Survivor* (2000-present). Many concepts for popular shows were established in the United Kingdom and later modified for American audiences. This should be noted, as reality television has a “scripted formula” that is applicable to various themes and genres. Hill (2005) argues that this type of television entertainment rose from the mixing of truth and fiction from tabloid journalism and documentary television. Dozens of concepts, such as dating, beauty makeovers and living challenges, were all situations that enthralled contestants and viewers. The unscripted interactions with non-celebrities aspiring to make their personal lives public became a voyeuristic activity for audiences to watch (Andrejevic, 2003).

MTV focuses on a younger audience for the network’s reality television demographic. These viewers are different from those of early *Survivor*, because the subject matter is niche specific to teenage audiences. *The Real World* (1990-present) incorporated the lives of seven strangers, all in their teens or twenties, living together while followed by a filming crew. The show is also the longest running series on MTV (Peyser, 2001). To find attractive topics to incorporate a larger percent of the network’s

target audience of 12-24, MTV created various reality television shows representing the multiple age brackets and interests (Downey, 2005).

MTV's *Laguna Beach: The Real Orange County* (2004-2006) reported on the lives of privileged cliques at a California high school. The program thrived from heavy drama storylines. Each season introduced new characters and relationships prior to episodes before. *Laguna Beach* is the "real world" version of Aaron Spelling's fictitious teen soap *Beverly Hills 90210*. The series concluded with the cast graduating high school and going their separate ways in life. Lauren "L.C." Conrad, the lead female on the series, was offered a spin-off reality show by MTV to document her new life in Los Angeles. *The Hills* collected 79.2 million viewers during the second season (Twohey, 2006). The Nielsen ratings for November 19-25, 2007 ranked *The Hills* as 8<sup>th</sup> in the Top 15 highest rating shows on cable television for the week, drawing in 4.3 million viewers (USA Today, 2007). *The Hills* premiered in 2006 and is currently filming season five.

### **Celebriality and Authenticity**

Media is responsible for creating and endorsing celebrities and stars by providing a public platform. Research has shown that idolization is gender specific and decreases with age (McCarley & Escoto, 2003). Signs (made of systems of languages, images and social construction) in media become "increasingly complex and self-referential, citing popular films, television programs, previous advertisements, music, popular products, comics, books, body codes, celebrities, etc; they create a feeling of belonging to a 'global clique' particularly aimed at youth culture" (Briggs, 2007, p. 39). Musicians, athletes, and actors have earned stardom through the achievement of a performance in a specific field, but what about celebrities that have become an overnight success? With the increased presence of reality programming on television, winners and/or participants have received additional media coverage and a boost in cultural status. Turner (2004) coined the phrase "the demotic turn" in reference to the increasing visibility of the "ordinary person" as s/he transforms into celebrity status through various avenues. As quickly as this stardom arrives, it can disappear with the next casting of the reality series (Turner, 2006). The term "celetoid" is used to explain the short lifecycle of reality show celebrities as

“accessories of culture organized around mass communication and staged authenticity” (Rojek, 2001, p. 20-1).

As for Lauren Conrad of *The Hills*, her endorsements and image have plastered the pages of female teenage magazines, blogs, television interviews, newspaper articles and the fresh face of her women’s fashion line; however, she is an example of the demotic turn. Conrad is the new “marketing juggernaut” for MTV and has turned from an “ordinary person” to a celebrity, starring in advertising for LG Mobile and Avon (Fairchild, 2007). Celebrities are “commodities whose personae are illusions created by manipulated film” with “virtual images that achieve impossible levels of perfection” (Briggs, 2007, p. 40). Not only is Conrad’s name recognizable in relation to a product, but her image as a television star also increases her marketing ability. Conrad is not only a spokeswoman for companies and corporations, but also a possible role model for those associating her fame from *The Hills*. With this considered, it is easy to understand the plethora of concerns interlaced within media literacy, such as the separation of real life and television character. Additionally, this is even more crucial to explain to girl cultures, as “role models” or media figures can perpetuate confusing dichotomies. For example, the 2007 drunk driving and drug-related arrest of Lindsey Lohan created a media frenzy that contradicted her youthful breakout image in *Mean Girls*. While Lohan is not a reality starlet, the same situation can apply to any female in the limelight.

Some viewers have questioned the authenticity of reality television series. For particular shows, the situations may not be within the realm of most people’s experience (such as in adventurous *Survivor*), but does this still apply to the reality programming that MTV has established (Hall, 2006)? While the fundamental element of reality television is the lack of scripting, it is possible for the producer to set the tone or the significance of an ordeal to create entertainment for increased viewership (Dunst, 2002). *The Hills* received speculation that the show is, in fact, scripted and staged by producers. Although the show is promoted as a “reality show” where the cameras merely follow individuals through their daily activities, many believe that the show is similar to traditional programs that are staged and scripted from MTV studios. Audiences have posted mistakes on website forums, such as continuity issues in clothing and hairstyle, to explain the creation and

fixed components of the show and the lack of realism (PerezHilton.com, 2007). Lauren Conrad released the following statement:

There have been some rumors in the press about *The Hills* being fake. Many of you have been asking me if the rumors are true. There are false rumors every week about me and I can't address every rumor out there, but I feel like this was important for me to respond to. The show is not fake and this is really my life. (Us Magazine Online, 2007, p.1)

The term 'reality' is ambiguous in terms of the MTV program, yet *The Hills* is a highly rated and watched series. There is evidence of a shift in a "clearly defined" reality that is expressed when bloggers discuss reality television situations and events. With the additional outlet of the internet, public figures and stars are becoming more celebrated and famous. Are we experiencing the "celebrification" of television and media culture?

### **Internet Blogs**

Weblogs, commonly referred to as "blogs," are "personal journals or reversed-chronological commentaries made publicly accessible on the World Wide Web" (Huffaker & Calvert, 2006, p. 1). The term was first quoted in 1997, but actively existed since the early 1990s. There were over 100 million active blogs at the end of 2007 (Wortham, 2007). The Pew Internet and American Life Project reported a 58% rise in readership during 2004. Blogs significantly vary in topics and can be moderated by one or many users. Many of the sites allow readers to comment on or discuss posts, creating an opportunity for a virtual dialogue. According to a study by Huffaker (2004), blogs are different from other forms of online communication due to: 1) ease-of-use, as users do not need to know HTML or other web programming languages to publish onto the Internet; 2) ways to archive information and knowledge; 3) opportunities for others to comment or provide feedback for each blog post; and 4) links to other "bloggers" to form online communities. Many servers, such as *Xanga* and *Livejournal*, provide free services for bloggers.

Teenagers makeup the majority of bloggers, with 52% of blogs developed and maintained by teenagers between 13-19 years of age (Huffaker & Calvert, 2006). This idea of a "virtual diary" documenting a life of a teenager publicizes "a period



traditionally marked by seizures of self-consciousness and personal confessions wrapped in layers” (Nussbaum, 2004, p. 2). Blogs have also served as a forum for adolescents to explore issues such as sexuality, identity and partner selection (Smahel, Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2005). A study conducted by Subrahmanyam & Lin (2007) found that most adolescents access the Internet from their homes and in the privacy of their rooms. Additionally, the authors noted the majority of adolescents in their sample had a limited relationship to other online users, suggesting that most online relationships remain in the digital domain. Previous research suggests that 56% of total bloggers are female (Henning, 2003). Like many other forms of web communication, blog users can represent individual identity through an avatar (a user-created screen name, personal profile and photograph used to express a virtual identity to others in cyberspace); therefore, online identity can be ambiguous in terms of sex and gender. For example, screen names may prevent fellow bloggers from “assuming” gender (i.e. *KSU\_Wildcat\_09* versus *KSU\_Chick\_09*) and picture uploads are not necessarily self-portraits. “Male and female teenagers present themselves similarly in their blogs, often revealing personal information such as their real names, ages, and locations,” implying that web identity is usually mirrored by actual identity (Huffaker & Calvert, 2006, p. 1).

“Web 2.0” is a term coined by Dale Dougherty as providing “a useful, if imperfect, conceptual umbrella under which analysts, marketers and other stakeholders in the tech field could huddle the new generation of internet applications and businesses that were emerging to form the ‘participatory web’ as we know it today” (Madden & Fox, 2006, p. 1). Blogs and social networking sites, such as *MySpace* and *Facebook*, are created by uploading user-manipulated content. This not only changes the way people use cyberspace, but also the meaning of community. Unique language, or “netspeak,” is often found in both blog entries and comment posts and is shaped through the creativity of its community (Crystal, 2001). “LOL,” for example, is shorthand for “Laugh Out Loud.” Emoticons are also used to emphasize a statement or express personification through computer screens. These figures represent faces and add a playfulness to webspace (e.g. :-)). Additionally, emoticons can dictate the tone of a comment that has the potential to be misread or misinterpreted by audience members.

It should also be noted that blog participation and internet usage is an elite privilege. Online access requires disposable income and time, as well as knowledge of how to operate computers and technological systems. Much of the world lacks these requirements, leaving only affluent populations the ability to shape and develop virtual technology. Harp & Tremayne (2006) clarifies:

But entering into, or having access, is only the first step in participating in a public dialogue. Voices need an audience to truly be part of a larger public conversation. A greater audience promises a louder voice and, theoretically, more power. While the Internet may allow more voices to enter into public discourse, current systems of power lend validity and volume to some voices while virtually ignoring others. While the Internet may offer access to a public sphere, an intellectual, patriarchal hegemony persists. (p. 256)

Cyberspace is not idealistic, as many of the same power struggles between the “haves and have-nots” subsist through online technology.

### **Cyberfeminism**

The Pew Internet and American Life Project found that 66% of men and 61% of women use the Internet in 2004. With the expansion and integration of the internet to broader audiences, the gender gap within technology may be closing (Subrahmanyam, Kraut, Greenfield & Gross, 2001; Greenfield & Subrahmanyam, 1998), but it is still unknown if this will lead to more contributions in related fields. Myburgh (2007) explains that the internet is a space where “‘things’ must not only be measured, but named, labeled, and placed in a hierarchical relationship to other ‘things’” (p. 20). Once these various concepts are competing, it will ultimately lead to discriminating attitudes towards both the technology and its users; one is superior, while the other is inferior. Myburgh (2007) continues:

This is the very nature of binary information. It creates exclusive, linear, and hierarchical structures which are at once imperialistic and hegemonic and inflexible. It cannot include new things. Other things are other. By gender exemplification, women are not men, are different, and are, therefore, other. (p.20)

This is a critical argument, as this research will look at how females navigate and reappropriate cyberspace to fit their needs. Women and men use the internet in different ways; however, the “separate but equal” clause is ignored. While females use the internet for communication tools, males are online seeking information (Jackson, Ervin, Gardner & Schmitt, 2001).

Online exploration is related to higher levels of social anxiety and less established identity statuses among male adolescents, but not females (Mazalin & Moore, 2004). Considering this study, one could suggest that the online forum provides an intrinsic opportunity for women to explore multiple arenas. Studies have shown that girls read and write about their everyday interactions and thoughts, such as relationships with family and friends (Finders, 1997 & Standford, 2005). Some may view this practice as “superficial” and following traditional gender ideologies. Williams (2006) accounts that girls’ literacy habits are not heavily connected to internet use, giving them a disadvantage to boys who are comfortable in that environment. One example of this explanation may be girls’ association with paper diaries and boys’ connection with technological video games. Gendered online use could be a potential problem for females: if women are not comfortable with computer practices and developing technology, they can find disadvantages in school, the workplace and society (Williams, 2006).

Haraway (1991) imagined a world where feminist agendas and identities could flourish in a non-binary, elastic virtual reality. Cyberfeminism is interested in how “digital media can be applied in a feminist theory and politics of the performance, thus stressing the structural binding of language/code and body in the performativity of the gendered body” (Strowick, 2004, p. 301). This practice encourages the use of cyberspace as an “alternative space” or resistance and identity play.

The second wave feminist battle cry of “the personal is political” is now in question as technology blurs the distinction of public/private. Myburg (2007) explains:

The Internet embodies the age of convergence. The Internet itself came into being because of technological convergence of computers and telecommunications. We experience convergence as we live. The example of lifelong learning is a good one: many people are simultaneously students, parents, grandparents and workers, and therefore have converging, sometimes overlapping,

roles. For women in particular, this way of living is not new. But it is now ubiquitous. (p. 21)

Myburg is optimistic, viewing cyberspace as non-linear, obtaining multiple realities and representations and creating new paradigms. The internet provides grounds for women, a marginalized group, to gain power and have their voices globally recognized. Others, such as Williams (2006), dispute this claim:

The utopian ideal that accompanied the early days of computermediated communication-that it would liberate individuals from the limits of culturally constructed identities-looks almost laughably naive as we see how dominant cultural ideologies shape technology uses. (p. 305)

The author encourages girls to question power relationships, roles in society and representation. Luke (2004) emphasizes that individuals should not overemphasize the positive potential of the internet, as negative social features in the real world can also be found in cyberspace.

Women are advised to utilize the various aspects of the internet, yet be cautioned by structural inequalities that may hinder possibilities in this arena (Youngs, 2004). As hegemonic societal values concerning intersectionalities (gender, class, race, sexuality, etc.) are recognized and addressed, the internet can be used as a space to exercise alternatives and resistance within the online and real realms. Cyberspace can then be deemed as hierarchical, but also transformative because of the adaptable and infinite realm of user manipulated technology. Cyberfeminism supports challenging and changing established online power and distribution of knowledge. Online communication can cultivate new ideas and points of view for navigating societal concerns.

### **Conceptions of Reality**

The characters on *The Hills* are upper-middle class or higher and come from privileged backgrounds. The lead character, Lauren Conrad, lives in a posh loft apartment with friend Heidi Montag, and later Audrina Patridge. The show depicts the girls at high-end restaurants and upscale designer boutiques freely spending without concern for any type of budget. The female characters all have sought after internships: Conrad is an intern at *Teen Vogue* magazine, Montag at celebrity party planning firm Bolthouse

Productions and Patridge at Epic Records. While MTV may be footing the bill for the extravagant purchases made on *The Hills*, the television show displays the spending habits as a reality for the girls, and arguably for females as traditional “consumers.” Are bloggers noting how privileges of cultural hegemonic identities (white, upper-class, heterosexual, etc.) reinforce hierarchical social structures? Are the comments expressing a desire to mirror these lifestyles or alternatively criticizing a lavish, elitist existence?

Females are the primary cast members on *The Hills* and thus cater to a female majority audience. The girls all engage in emotional relationships with males: Conrad and Patridge either wait patiently for love from male suitors or are submissive to misbehavior from romantic interests. Additionally, the females on the show thrive on drama and broken friendships that produce mascara-ridden tears and gossip. Alliances are formed that create “teams” for viewers to watch interact, usually pitting female characters against each other. Like a fictional narrative, Conrad, Patridge and Montag are either considered “cool” or as “bitches.” There is little room for middle ground. This analysis will collect the attitudes concerning the representation of young females in society.

### **Authenticity and Gratifications**

Finally, this research will accumulate responses about the celebrity status of the reality television characters on *The Hills*. For example, because Conrad was featured on the cover of teen magazines, is she more relatable as a “role-model” to girls? How influential are Conrad and the other characters of *The Hills* to various factors of everyday life? If believed to be fake or staged, why are so many people watching the show? Radway (1991) famously expressed that women may find pleasure and construct identity by reading romance novels for various reasons, such as fantasy and escapism. Perhaps *Hills’* audiences find pleasure in looking at the characters and materials to stay relevant in media popular culture (such as fashion trends), well-knowing that the lifestyles are irrelevant to her/his actual life. Viewers may only be watching the show for entertainment benefits. Although patriarchal values are expressed in media, it does not necessarily mean that women are only using these texts in the intended passive ways. There can be an appreciation for the material for various reasons outside of the original design. It would

also be important to learn the mixture of gratifications the participants gain from being a *Hills* fan and if each believes that the show is actually reality for a late teenage girl.

## **Methodology**

The effects of mass communications was studied to determine the outcomes of mass media messages on various audiences (Severin & Tankard, 2001). The cultivation theory was developed by Gerbner to explain the effects of television viewing on people's perceptions, attitudes and values (Severin & Tankard, 2001). Gerbner measured the perceptions of reality of heavy versus light television watching viewers, finding that those with heavy television habits perceive the world to be similar to programs that s/he regularly watch. Many of the studies were related to the perception of violence on television as a measure of real life crime statistics (Gerbner & Gross, 1976).

Several modifications have been made to the original claims of the theory. Gerbner, Gross, Morgan and Signorielli (1986) divided the cultivation model into two types: first-order beliefs and second-order beliefs. First-order beliefs are related to assorted facts concerning the real world, such as the percent of those who are victims of crime; second-order beliefs are the polarizing of these facts to form general expectations, such as, "the world is a dangerous place" (Severin & Tankard, 2001). Further research has proven that other variables, such as gender, age, and education, have an effect on the level of cultivation from television (Severin & Tankard, 2001).

McLeod (1995) argues that the cultivation theory may only hold true for specific genres of television programming and expanded research as "extended cultivation hypothesis." Gerbner and his associates have discarded this hypothesis, arguing that testing cultivation on specific program preferences does not address fundamental assumptions of the theory. Hirsch (1980) criticized the theory for lack of control for identity variables, explaining that if all of the factors were monitored, the effects of television would be relatively small. Gerbner later modified the cultivation theory and added two concepts: mainstreaming and resonance. Mainstreaming is used to describe the convergence of outlooks across groups by heavy television viewing, while resonance occurs when the cultivation outcome is boosted for a certain group or population (Severin & Tankard, 2001). This modification of the cultivation model no longer assumes that

cultivation across audiences is homogeneous, but rather only effecting particular groups strongly.

A component of the theory is that cultivation processing is a result of heuristic processing, or the mode of processing that required little effort and uses few cognitive resources; common examples are “experts can be trusted” and “attractive people are sociable” (Shrum, 2001). Cultivation research has also predicted that media is a larger influence for those who do not have first-hand experience with a topic and are forced to rely on media for information (Bilandzic, 2006). The two criteria contributing to audiences’ interpretation of realism are *typicality*, the view that a media represents events or characteristics that are representative of a particular population, and *factuality*, perception that media truthfully represents an actual event or person (Hill, 2006).

Cultivation is an important theory to consider when looking at social media networks; because the internet allows user feedback, one can look for patterns of acceptance, negotiation and rejection. Furthermore, gender fits within this framework of study to determine how audiences are viewing hegemonies favored by mass media gatekeepers. Feminist theory allows for a critical analysis of the traditional patriarchal lifestyles portrayed on *The Hills* and in society. With heavy focuses on heteronormativity, gender stereotypes and privilege, this research will attempt to connect the dots between media messages and audience responses.

A textual analysis of celebrity gossip blogs is the method used to collect data for this study. This methodology is for individuals who want to “understand the ways in which members of various cultures and subcultures make sense of who they are and of how they fit into the world in which they live” (McKee, 2003, p.1). Textual analysis practices are often time consuming, often leading researchers to explore few texts in a qualitative fashion within the social sciences (Carley, 1993). This study is a qualitative explanation, as this approach attempts to understand interpretations of texts by those who consume media. As a result, data will provide richer cultural and societal explanations.

This research is examining the exchange of dialogue and multiple interpretations of texts from MTV’s *The Hills*. Research questions focusing on gender, appropriating cyberspace and implications of everyday “reality” versus the “reality” portrayed on television will be applied to blog posts in an attempt to unpack the various meanings

expressed by audiences. While previous internet studies have examined the popularity of reality television shows, such as *Big Brother* and *The Bachelor*, few have looked at adolescent and/or teenage focused reality programming. Additionally, few studies have reviewed audience processing via internet blogging. This is why this study is important and leads to the following questions:

**Research Questions:**

R1: Do bloggers create dialogue and interact with one another on message boards?

R2: Do bloggers critique and resist traditional gender roles on *The Hills*?

R3: Do bloggers believe *The Hills* is representative of relatable or possible lifestyles?

R4: Are bloggers are critical of characters on *The Hills*?

R5: Do bloggers believe *The Hills* is staged, even though labeled as a reality show?

R6: Do celebrity blogs have the potential to serve as a platform for cyberfeminism for users?



## CHAPTER 3 - Results

For this research, a textual analysis of user and/or avatar comments from six randomly selected filter blog (“journal-style” blog format that categorizes content for user convenience) websites was collected. The six randomly selected blogs vary in regularity of *Hills*-related posts from November 1, 2008 until November 30, 2008. Only posts that featured *The Hills* or show characters in the headings will qualify. Additionally, there were not interactions with bloggers in these communities, only an analysis of existing texts posted on message boards. The following high-traffic celebrity gossip blogs were studied for this project:

- *Perez Hilton*: <http://www.perezhilton.com>
- *TMZ*: <http://www.tmz.com>
- *Oh No They Didn't*: <http://www.community.livejournal.com/ohnotheydidnt/>
- *Pink is the New Blog*: <http://www.pinkisthenewblog.com/>
- *D-Listed*: <http://www.dlisted.com>
- *The Superficial*: <http://thesuperficial.com/>

**Table 1.1 *Hills* and Non-*Hills* Posts on Six Gossip Blogs during November 2008**

Celebrity Gossip Blogs	<i>Hills</i> Related Posts	Non- <i>Hills</i> Related Posts	Total Posts
<i>D-Listed</i>	2	431	433
<i>Oh No They Didn't</i>	25	3111	3136
<i>Perez Hilton</i>	20	1170	1190
<i>Pink is the New Blog</i>	7	350	357
<i>The Superficial</i>	2	185	187
<i>TMZ</i>	7	744	751

From the comments, this study examined what viewers and bloggers were communicating in regard to the situations and characters presented on MTV’s reality show *The Hills*.

Themes and reactions from the content were reviewed to learn more about how audiences respond to hegemonic societal norms. Are bloggers using message boards to

communicate with each other and create dialogues? How are females expressing various points of view on these websites? What different types of “reality” are cultivated from *The Hills*’ characters and their “performances?” Celebrity blogs are not necessarily superficial or trivial, as these sites are creating platforms for new forms of media and interaction where “you can be yourself, against a duplicitous world in which you have to conform to the expectation of others” (Coyne, 1999, p. 4). In a world that holds inequality for women, this research could provide new information to further explore how females are appropriating technology and the internet.

The information from the blogs were compiled and used as a collective piece of the study. Transcripts were divided into themes or subjects and the participants’ discussion thoughts have been expressed in detail. For example, those comments regarding traditional gender resistance were reviewed (Example: “There is more to life than beauty and boyfriends.”). Messages about authenticity were also explored (Example: “Lauren Conrad is a fraud.”), as well as communication between avatars (Example: “Hey Cupcake2007, LOL- I agree with you! Are you on MySpace?”)

An analysis of the responses to particular topics will attempt to evaluate the varied answers and explain the participants’ viewpoints. Although *The Hills* cultivates the lifestyles and societal expectations of young teenage girls, this rhetoric is also hypothesized to be met with resistance and community building. If these opportunities are present, do blog users take advantage of this media platform?

By exploring the data and results, research can contribute to find the conceptual effects of reality television (specifically shows towards adolescent females) on girlhood culture, as well as how convergence disrupts the one-way flow of media programming. Additionally, the data can be used to look at styles of cultural and societal resistance that can be created in opposition to mainstream hegemonic principles.

*D-Listed* (Michael K.), *Perez Hilton* (Mario Lavandeira), and *Pink is the New Blog* (Trent) are all hosted by a lead moderator as opposed to multiple contributors. The moderators are all openly homosexual males who often use personal self-promotion on their sites, such as photographs and recaps of daily activities. *Perez Hilton* has transformed into a marketing phenomenon, hosting special events, serving as a guest on television programming and acquiring a publishing and clothing design contracts. *The*

*Superficial* is an entity of Anticlow Media, an independent media publisher that has multiple writers for the website. *TMZ* (“Thirty Mile Zone”) is a faction of AOL and Telepicture Productions and also uses multiple contributors for blog content. To accompany the blog, there is also *TMZ on TV*, a converged cable television program of information displayed on the website. All of the previously mentioned blogs feature advertisements and banners to gain revenue to fund the websites.

*Oh No They Didn't* is forum blog hosted by free virtual community *LiveJournal*. This particular blog is for members only, meaning that an individual must register a username and avatar with *LiveJournal* to post comments. As of March 30, 2009, *LiveJournal* had 19,304,367 accounts, 66.2% of those identified as female users; 50,000 users are members of *Oh No They Didn't* (<http://www.livejournal.com/stats.bml>). This blogging community is operated by ten moderators who accept and decline *Oh No They Didn't* blog memberships, as well as maintain posts and serve as webmasters. Multiple users contribute and comment to create content as opposed to the other blogs used in this study.

#### R1: Bloggers create dialogue and interact with one another on message boards.

Blog comments allow users to express personal opinions and beliefs, as well as construct dialogue amongst multiple avatars. The gossip blogs studied rely on commenters and user posts to build an audience; the platform is not rigid, but a landscape of interactions between screen names. While there are discussions on each blog researched, *Oh No They Didn't* provided the most open and highest number of comments for each *Hills*-related post.

On November 6, 2008, *room\_eight* made the post “Whitney Port looking cute in the rain this morning” with photographs of the *Hills* star walking across a city street in dreary weather. This particular post was accompanied by four pages of compressed comments.

*teflondawn*: WHERE ARE PEOPLE GETTING THESE FANTASTIC BOOTS? Fuck. I can't find a decent pair (for a decent price) anywhere.

*krissynyc*: Seriously. I've been looking too!

*mishane*: I bought this really hot pair from BCBG. \$189 but the Macy's guy gave me 20% off cause he likes me :)  
<http://shop.nordstroms.com/S/2983657?Category=&Search=True&SearchType=keywordsearch&keyword=bcbg+in+Women%27s+Shoes+origin=searchresults>

BCBC Moca Boot. It looks sooo hot on, with a pair of skinny jeans. Like a rocking biker or something. They're my fave buy (besides my black Pocantas boots) this season.

*krissy*: I love them! I have a gift card so I might use it towards this purchase. I saw something similar too in Aldo.

*mishane*: They are seriously amazing. And they are not high heeled which I needed, but not completely flat either. They have a 1 inch thick heel. Oh, just get them!

*krissy*: I most definitely will now. Thanks =]

*alexandraleigh*: Are they loose enough in the calves to tuck jeans into? No weird poofy thing?

*mishane*: Oh yeah. That was my main concern. You definitely don't wear jeans over them, unless your jeans are ridiculously large. I can fit my skinnies and my boot/straight leg into them. Nothing poofy. (And if you get them, get them from Macy's. I don't know how it happened. I was buying them I just kind of whined to the guy, "Can you give me ANY kind of discount?" and he was like "Yeah, I'll give you 20% off." Holla!)

*alexandraleigh*: This is huge news. I know what I am doing immediately after work.

*supervixen06*: ME TOO! I've only found one pair of good boots, I need to know where to buy more.

*when\_itsizzles*: i got the best pair at journeys for 30 bucks. they were originally 80 so i got a great deal. real leather too. u just gonna get lucky. don't go out looking for them, you need to just FIND them.

*eerrinn*: I know, the only boots I want are \$200 and I can't justify that (frye multi-strap)

*mishane*: Nordstroms is having their 40% womens sale and I saw a pair of Frye boots for about \$140-\$150. They were originally \$380.

*eerrinn*: ooo thank you, I will def have to check that out!

*enigmaticbomb*: frye = best boots ever

*xtinkerbella*: IA, it's hard to find great boots for a decent price. I always end up paying 100-200+ because I can't find good quality boots for less, and I wear boots almost every day.

In this particular post, users are commenting on their desire to duplicate Port's fashion and style. *Boomstick* encourages the community to discuss options for chic yet affordable footwear. In the thread, others also express their frustration with reasonably priced boots and their availability. *Mishane* offers a first-hand experience of finding shoes, as well as provides a link, price and point of purchase. Considering society places pressure on women to look attractive and stylish, as well as establish purchasing power, bloggers can use the internet AS a platform for exchange of tips and advice from others. Also, this aspect of consumerism may be the craft of stealth advertisers touting goods to online message boards to increase popularity and sales.

On the following page, an additional thread is exchanged between *Oh No They Didn't* bloggers:

*boomstick*: <embedded YouTube video of "Gem Sweater">  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ypr436DFTUQ>

*diorporfavor*: I was JUST about to post that. Looking VERY Leslie Hall, Whitney!

*pagesixsixsix*: WTF is this? I'm entranced.

*boomstick*: Leslie and the Lys. I love this video even more:  
<embedded YouTube video of "We are the Web">  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8VrCCpaEoxI>

*dickieangenson*: i am speechless. is this purely ironic or parody? or this for real?

*boomstick*: They're legit. They tour and everything. I so badly want to see them live.

*mercystars*: That's just beautiful!

It is important to note the effects of the web 2.0 and user generated media online. Websites, photos, videos, songs and games all have the phenomenal ability to "go viral." In other words, content has the ability to spread quickly to a high number of internet users and be passed along to others. Leslie Hall is an internet success, promoting her eccentric performance art on social networking and streaming her videos on websites. Blogs allow for multiple forms of communications and the rapid distribution of media. Sites, such as the ones used in this research, allow bloggers to transmit what s/he deems important, relevant or entertaining.

*Perez Hilton* posted “There WILL be a 5<sup>th</sup> Season of *The Hills*” on November 16, 2008. Multiple users exchanged posts:

*Superbad13*: RE: Listen to Mayday Parade- I totally agree with you. Nothing beat those. MTV should try focusing on... oh I don't know... music? Music videos and if not how about changing the name? because it definitely isn't music television anymore agreed?

Similar patterns were also found on *Pink is the New Blog* “The Windy City” on November 7, 2008:

*Duckie*: I agree with Robin 100%: her sweater looks like one of the sweaters I used to wear when I was 8 or 9. And the light denim is so 1990s...

Unfortunately, harassment and “virtual violence” occur in cyberspace. Web conversations are not always polite or constructive between bloggers. Because there is no “face-to-face” interaction, individuals may feel more comfortable posting on blogs with disregard to other individuals. A computer screen can serve as a mask to hide behind, leaving some to abandon any inhibitions of political correctness. On November 24, 2008, *The Superficial* wrote a blog post titled “Heidi Montag and Spencer Pratt Eloped:”

*Ummm...yeah*: Fish is a liar! Randal is an assclown. OMFG! What the fuck does it take to get rid of these two assholes once and for all??

Fish you fuckin gutless wonder! Simple fag! NO MORE OF THESE TWO... WHO THE FUCK CARES????!!!!!!!!!!!!

Hateful discriminatory speech, such as “fag,” was commonly found on all of the celebrity gossip blog comments used in this study. Blog moderators may choose to ostracize or ban users who participate in this behavior, but new-comers or visitors may feel unwelcome in this hostile environment.

Bloggers not only post personal comments, thoughts and beliefs on message boards, but also create online relationships. There is dialogue created between users, further defining cyberspace as a network of interlinking communities. Individuals learn and refer to each other by their usernames and avatars, allowing the exercise of virtual identity and lifestyles. Blogs are interactive, not just an open space where users post a comment and log off. While this act is not gender specific, online communication serves

to demonstrate the nature of technological advances on ideological processing and demands new considerations for the term “community.”

R2: Bloggers critique and resist traditional gender roles on *The Hills*.

Mass media is controlled by gatekeepers, a privileged elite group that promotes dominant ideologies in society through several channels. Although these messages and images are promoted to the public, some individuals may choose to accept, negotiate or reject the so-called “ideals.” Internet allows for immediate dialogue exchange and feedback, as well as a greater audience reception. Do *Hills* bloggers recognize this stifling creed in terms of gender? There are examples of bloggers dissatisfied with the traditional gender roles that some characters on the reality show exercise.

*D-Listed* posted a thread on November 24, 2008 entitled “When Two Douchebags Become One” announcing the wedding of Heidi Montag and Spencer Pratt.

*Alex\_Mack*: woww isn't she like 21 or 22? I'm 21 and im not against marriage at all- but I cant see myself anywhere NEAR being ready to get married... not for another 10 years or so... wow. I mean I think some people are ready at an early age, so don't get me wrong, im not saying anything against people who get married at this age. Buttttt they don't strike me as particularly mature or grown for their age, like the people who really are ready for marriage. But lets be honest... hearing people my age getting married just scares me! Maybe im just an immature ass. Oh well.

*Dallas*: This is the biggest bunch of crap. These two are such media whores! Heidi does not have one thought that is her own. What Pratt say's, she does. Sad situation!

*ILovePapaSmurf*: Great, when this magazine arrives in my Mom's mailbox, I know I'm going to get a call. “You're 25-years-old, ILPS and you're not married. Why can't you be like Heidi and find your own Spencer.” Where's a good gun when you need it?

Marriage is an institutionalized form of controlling women's power considered sexist and heterosexist. From an early age, females absorb impractical stories of Prince Charming and a Knight in Shining Armor, aspiring to find romance, love and marriage.

*ILovePapaSmurf* shares the experience of operating outside of traditional gender norms and the pressure from family institutions. The avatar hints that their mother believes that s/he is of mature age and should “settle down” with a male partner. The snarky reply of

“Where’s a good gun when you need it?” is *ILovePapaSmurf* expressing frustration with societal expectations to be in a heterosexual civil union. Although it is a personal choice to have/not have a significant other, perhaps this user is attempting to explore an identity online. For example, *ILovePapaSmurf* could be a lesbian trapped in a compulsory heterosexual world unable to openly or safely express sexuality, especially to family members. *ILovePapaSmurf* later explains that she is a Mexican-American, adding more layers to her role as a woman and conforming to social norms. *Alex Mack* also provides thoughts on the uneasiness of imagining marriage during one’s early twenties, explaining that s/he is not “anywhere NEAR being ready” for matrimony.

*Pink is the New Blog* posted the update on November 18, 2008 “The Hills- Heidi Finally sees the Lights?” User *Katt* explains confusion regarding why Montag continues to date Pratt, who is portrayed as controlling, manipulative and dominating to his female partner.

*Katt*: heidi and spencer drive me crazy. though i don’t get why heidi would put up with spencer- even if it is fake. if it is fake- why would she want to look like a moron for staying with him? she just looks pathetic. i just don’t get it. but it is a guilty pleasure still. i’m going to try and not get into next season.....

*Katt* criticizes the passive role Montag adopts in the relationship, calling her “pathetic.” Pratt has wedged himself between Montag and her friends, creating drama and broken female relationships. Montag’s actions (or lack thereof) to stand up for herself against Pratt’s masculine power has raised disapproving posts from bloggers.

On *Perez Hilton*, *LynJames* comments on the November 5, 2008 post “Does Anyone Care That Heidi Got Fired?”:

*LynJames*: Dear Heidi: take this as a sign. Throw that dirtbag spencer out, scrape your make up off and become “real” again. Plastic is just gross. Oh, please. No more singing!

Montag publicly announced receiving plastic surgery (specifically breast enhancement) after pictures noting the bodily changes surfaced in media. There have been feminist theorists (such as Naomi Wolf) who argue that plastic surgery for women is a form of patriarchal power pushing for perfect and unnatural standards of beauty.



Considering that cosmetic surgical procedures for women are routine in the medical field, females are succumbing to unrealistic, artificial means of transforming their bodies to society's expectations. *LynJames* argues that "plastic is just gross" and Montag should reflect on the reasons why she is drastically changing her physical appearance.

The following examples express varying opinions of gender roles and how one should "do" gender. All of the comments are directed toward female characters, hinting that this is dissatisfaction in their performances for public scrutiny on cable television. The majority of these comments are directed towards Montag, the only female character with a steady heterosexual relationship interested in marriage. Perhaps the commentary is audience disapproval for Montag being the mouthpiece for stereotypical women's actions and unquestioning stride. Nonetheless, blog comments reflect opposition to female gender roles on *The Hills*.

R3: Bloggers do not believe *The Hills* is representative of relatable or possible lifestyles.

Many of the blog posts made by moderators and commenters express the unrealistic lifestyles of the characters on *The Hills*. White, upper-class, heterosexual, beautiful young adults with excessive spending habits and privilege is the minority of American society. The men and women on the television program drive expensive cars, have lucrative internships, attend private celebrity parties and sport designer clothing. Although MTV markets *The Hills* as a reality show, it is obvious to many audiences that Conrad's lifestyle does not accurately represent viewers' reality, nor will it ever.

On November 2, 2008, *lady\_lobo\_2007* posted on *Oh No They Didn't* "Lauren Conrad at the LA Airport for her College Collection Tour" sparked the following exchange:

*Spencoid*: uhhhhh. Poor college kids CANNOT afford her clothing...

*Thisisjersey*: which is why shes probably only going to four "major" universities, because then they are more likely to have daddys credit card in their wallet and can charge whatever they want.

Conrad's clothing collection has various pieces costing well over one hundred dollars per item. *Spencoid* argues that on a college budget, many students would not be

able to afford to purchase clothes from the line. *Thisisjersey* follows up that Conrad is only going to four “major” universities that are privileged and prestigious, places where students may have the excess income for acquiring her fashion collection. Obviously, there are more than four universities in the United States, leading many to believe that Conrad’s fashion tour was carefully constructed to reflect the way of life familiarized in the show.

*Pink is the New Blog* posted on November 11, 2008 “The Hills- Don’t Hate the Player:”

*hills sucks*: the hills sucks and the the city will suck..when are people going to get over this fucking bullshit shallow show? With all that has been going in the world how can you even watch this bullshit with a good conscience? All of you people should be ashamed!

*Hills sucks* is unfavorable towards not only *The Hills*, but also the show’s audience and bloggers for perpetuating attention to the program. This user wants a proactive, political dialogue on the celebrity gossip website and criticizes those who feed the popularity of the program.

*Perez Hilton* posted on November 24, 2008 “Spencer and Heidi Got Married:”

*RDRH*: Yeah, heres a thought... these two bleached blond fucktards are not celebs. They LOVE the fact you post about them. They LOVE this attention. Stop feeding them... they are indeed trolls. People like them are making the idea of celebrity something you can just become/join at will. They are not talented and they are as popular as, um, ME. Yet you never posted about MY marriage. They are ugly, stupid, and fameless. Stop putting their pictures up... they WANT that. Shit, I would bet money they pay you to do it, Perez.

*RDRH* explicitly relates how artificial *The Hills* appears by pointing out that blogs never reported on her/his wedding. Although the show pushes “ordinary people,” *The Hills* characters are notoriety in their own rights and receive the associated benefits. The user also notes Montag and Pratt, as well as reality television and blogs, are manufacturing the concept of easily becoming a “celebrity.” Additionally, *RDRH* pleads for bloggers to stop posting about the couple, as this action only fulfills their lust for fame. This is a theme seen in other gossip blog message boards. Finally, there is also an

accusation that media and celebrities have a working relationship to exploit coverage opportunities, as opposed to spontaneous, unbiased exposure.

Comments indicate that bloggers understand there is a division between the “reality” on MTV and the reality of their everyday lives. Most individuals will never have a highly rated cable television show centered on their activities, much less receive the publicity and reputation of those on *The Hills*. Reality television is understood to be an industry for entertainment as opposed to accurate documentation of average people. The characters on the television show are perceived to be actors, not average individuals.

#### R4: Bloggers are critical of characters on *The Hills*.

The majority of the text generated by users on *Hills*-related blog posts were hostile and critical of the characters. Derogatory comments and allegations are hurled on message boards, often inciting others to join in and “bully.” The following are examples of aggressive online communication found in the research.

*Oh No They Didn't* on November 13, 2008 had the following post by *javeh* on the thread “Spencer Talks Proposition 8: Who are His Favorite Homosexuals?:”

*Choco\_carebear*: He and his bitch are full of fail.

*Mmc327*: He for being an ass and she for not kicking his lame ass to the curb like now. If some dude treated me like he treats her, he's be done likethat.

*D-Listed* on November 24, 2008 had the following dialogue on the post “When Two Douchebags Become One:”

*Bda*: and let me guess some camera crew from MTV will happen to be there too right? Look out for their own reality show BARF! And isn't she only 22? And marrying this guy? Is she really serious?

*Jim*: WHO THE FUCK CARES!!! WHY PEOPLE BUY THIS SHIT AND GIVE A FUCK WHAT OTHER PEOPLE, IN THIS CASE 2 COMPLETE TALENTLESS FOOLS, DO IN THEIR LIVES AND WHY YOU SHOULD GIVE A SHIT! THESE LOSERS WOULD HANG YOU THEIR TRASH, PAT YOU ON THE HEAD AND SPIT IN OUR EYE BECAUSE THEY ARE ON A MAGAZINE! INSTEAD OF WASTING YOUR MONEY ON THIS CRAP, TAKE YOUR KIDS TO THE MOVIES, GAMES, GO GET A BEER, WATCH A FOOTBALL GAME,

SMOKE A FUCKING BOWL WITH YOUR CAT... JUST STOP  
BOASTING THESE LOSERS EGOS!!

*Pink is the New Blog* posted on November 11, 2008 “Don’t Hate the Player:”

*Michelle*: I don’t feel bad for Heidi. It seems to me that for some unknown reason that girl seems to think she is above pretty much everything. I’m glad she got fired for getting drunk while working. Any non “psuedo-celeb” in her position or in any working environment would be fired. Spencer getting his ass handed to him by Bolthouse was priceless!

These blog posts both are directed towards Montag and Pratt and include aspects of traditional gender role resistance. *Mmc327* analyzes the relationship, adding that s/he would never stand for poor treatment as Montag has chosen. *Choco\_carebear* refers to Montag as “his bitch,” implying that she is Pratt’s possession unworthy of being referred to by given name. This is especially disturbing, as violence against women (both literally and figuratively) includes objectifying the subject and removing humanistic connection. *Bda* points out that twenty-two may be too young for marriage, as well as condescending acknowledgement of Pratt. *Michelle* is unsympathetic of Montag’s actions, feeling as if her job dismissal was well deserved in accordance to unprofessional actions. *Jim*, conversely, offers random alternative suggestions for activities to participate in as opposed to supporting *The Hills*.

Although the minority, there are *Hills*-positive posts present on blogs. *The Superficial* posted “Audrina Patridge in a Bikini” on November 11, 2008:

*Tash*- Everyone is being so mean to her. I think she is fantastic, I love the show and think the girls on it have the best lives. Everyone just pays her out because they are jealous.

*Tash* suggests that other bloggers are “jealous” of Patridge and other female characters on *The Hills*, which is why many comments are negative. By offering online support for the show, users are opening themselves up for attacks from other members of the community; however, *Tash* did not receive a reply on the forum. The enmity present in discussions may lead some to refrain from expressing encouraging comments, which may explain the highly critical results.

It should be noted that while most of the blog comments were negative and disrespectful of *Hills* characters, bloggers are still watching the television program and up

to date with current *Hills* gossip. This adds an interesting dynamic for “fandom,” as celebrity gossip sites offer a space for users to “love to hate” *The Hills* and associated characters. Why do bloggers need to fulfill trash talking online? At first glance, the message boards on these sites read like graffiti on bathroom walls. Is it voicing an immediate opinion and providing feedback (as opposed to sluggish postal service mail) or is it a form of resistance to change what and who is granted media coverage? Furthermore, is this backlash encouraged (perhaps by MTV) to generate additional interest and revenue? While there seems to be more loathing audiences represented on internet gossip blogs, there is no lack of viewers sustaining the reality program.

R5: Bloggers believe *The Hills* is staged, even though labeled as a reality show.

Reality television is inexpensive and quickly produced, making it an easy choice for networks to add to programming schedules. MTV is currently overwhelmed with reality shows, suggesting that “Music Television” and videos may be out of style. *The Real World* and *Road Rules* expressed that ordinary people audition for roles on the shows, often accompanying the program as a “Casting Special.” The idea for the programs, then, is to compile clips of daily events for the thirty minute timeslot. Although this is simplifying the concept, many audiences did not question this approach to reality television. Editors and producers piece together these clips to create storylines and capture audience attention. Once the genre engulfed mass media, viewers became skeptical of what exactly was “reality” on the television. Not to say that earlier reality television programs were not scripted or doubted, but there was a different marketing approach and an ounce of gullibility in audiences.

*Oh No They Didn't* on November 5, 2008 posted “Sad Day for Speidi” by *102bb*:

*Kris\_terror*: Is that a script you're holding?

*Liquiddatura*: I really wish ONTD would refuse reality actors who don't have any outside fame.

*Ultravlnmoloko*: I have wondered asked many times why ontd even bothers with them

*Beatlerecords*: these people are not interesting or newsworthy they are hideous reality stars who make ugly fashion choices and seem totally vapid please let them fade into obscurity immediately

*Pink is the New Blog* published on November 18, 2008 “The Hills- Heidi Finally Sees the Lights?:”

*SpecialK*: It’s just stupid senseless entertainment. I can only have room for one of these shows, so until something more fake and contrived comes out I will continue to watch the hills like so many other little minions.  
I think the best episode will be when Heidi finally kicks Spencer to the curb. Last night was a tease. Spencer an ass and the problem? Is Heidi getting smarter?

“Lauren Conrad Gets a Harsh Reality Check” was posted on *Perez Hilton* on November 11, 2008:

*Stella89*: this girl has no talent, is a skany, lucky to be famous for no reason, needs to get over herself, can not waittttt until her 15 minutes of fame is over and her talentless self has a hard time finding work because no one will be her “fan” anymore. God I hate her and all the rest of the HILLS girls that think they are a-list actresses!

The blog posts indicate that *The Hills* characters are below “celebrity status” and merely chasing fame. *Stella89* and *Beatlerecords* imply that *The Hills* characters are unremarkable and talentless, as opposed to actors frequently seen on the blogging websites. There is also a sense of insignificance that these posts express about the reality stars, as *Special K* expresses. Their time on television is short-lived: *The Hills* program and characters’ success will fade once the show is off-air. Unlike other celebrities, there is not staying power with reality stars. A new MTV program will take the place of *The Hills* and there will be a new batch of characters for audiences to follow and discuss.

*D-Listed* posted on November 28, 2009 “The Sanctity of Marriage is Alive and Well” that questioned the legality of Montag and Pratt’s marriage:

*Monalicious*: First..... two people who love each other, but happen to be the same sex cant get married because it would be a “unholy union”. But these two idiots can get “fake married” and its CELEBRATED????? What did I miss? Second, people bitch about pro wrestling being “fake.” Hello..... What the hell is that crap these two star on? A “scripted” reality show? Sounds like the same thing. Too bad reality tv worlds cant meet because I would love to see Tommy Dreamer and his REAL wife Beula kick Spencer and Heidi’s ass’ all over LA!!!

*Monalicious* adds a politically-charged statement to the blog message board by discussing the inability of lesbians and homosexuals to legally marry in the United States. During the November national and state elections, California voted “No” on Proposition 8, which would have allowed for legal recognition of same-sex marriage across the state. The voting issue received copious amounts of media attention from those for and against the proposal. Due to the discriminatory nature of Proposition 8, protests broke out in cities across America to spotlight equality for sexual orientation. *Monalicious* supports Proposition 8, as the comment implies injustice towards the opportunity of marriage for Montag and Pratt and not other couples. Furthermore, the commenter differentiates between *The Hills* and professional wrestling in terms of “fakeness.” *Monalicious* argues that although both shows are “scripted reality,” professional wrestling is a sport and has a more authentic edge.

If many bloggers believe that *The Hills* is a bogus scripted program, why is there such an avid audience and continual reactions to the content? Do viewers consider all reality television shows to resemble the “fakeness” on *The Hills* or is there some sort of differentiation? Perhaps this is an indication that reality television is soon on the way out as a favored form of entertainment due to networks exhausting the concept.

#### R6: Celebrity blogs have potential to serve as a platform for cyberfeminism for users.

This hypothesis was the initial interest for this qualitative study. Although feminists were initially idealistic of the opportunities in cyberspace, it was quickly discovered that this space was not a futuristic utopia. The internet was and continues to be a space for gender dialogue. While there is no such thing as an entirely “safe space” from harassment, the internet does provide a platform for women with technological knowledge and access to ask questions, receive advice, share stories and explore possibilities. Considering that society bombards contradicting and complicated female expectations, bodily images, gender performances and ideologies, cyberspace offers a platform to express the need for navigation.

Blogs may be quickly dismissed for lacking accuracy and legitimacy; however, the same is also being said about cable television news programming and other mediums. Those who identify with feminism can rally around specific causes, develop and mobilize

as a collective through the internet. Community news targeting women, such as sexual violence, can be quickly spread to alert others online. Celebrity gossip websites are not an exception. Though not the original objective of these blogs, content is created by what others post online. User-generated substance is what differentiates internet medias from others, as well as defines cyberculture. It is also important to note that most of the celebrity blogs in this study have women as focal points of daily posts. This could help ignite the discussion of female issues and agendas on gossip websites, or it could also cause others to be hypercritical of women. In this research, there were examples of cyberfeminism existing on gossip blogs.

On November 11 2008, *tabloidaddict* made a post (linking the original source from <http://www.popcrunch.com/lauren-conrad-drink-drugged/>) about Conrad's experience being date-rape drugged on *Oh No They Didn't*:

'I actually had someone put something in my drink while I was out and had no idea. Luckily, I was with a group of friends, so it was fine. But you have to be careful. It's a difficult age and you don't have a lot of experience in dating, and you don't know what he norm is and what's acceptable. Dating abuse isn't something that's normally talked about. It has such a stigma to it.' In conjunction with Avon's Mark cosmetics, the 22-year-old star of MTV's *The Hills* has started to campaign to combat teen dating abuse. Lauren is now a spokeswoman for m.powerment, an advocacy campaign for women ages 16 to 24. (p. 1)

*Stayingdrunk*: that's happened to two of my friends. It is terrifying. Especially when you have no idea it has happened. It happened to one of my friends on her birthday. We all assumed she was just really, really loaded. She was basically a ragdoll. Looking back on it we're all like 'how the fuck did we think that was normal behaviour?!'

*Damnspammed*: "she was basically a rag doll" It's so creepy to think that some guys would take advantage of that. I seriously have shivers right now.

*Beckyish0t*: omg that's so scary.

*Dyingtolivee87*: Shit like that is so scary. Like I could never imagine going out alone or with someone who wouldn't watch my back. It's sad that it has to be done, but the world's a fucked up place



In this discussion, bloggers discuss personal stories of how date rape drugs have affected their lives. While *Stayingdrunk* expresses that gender violence occurred to “two friends,” the post still illustrates a first-hand account of the situation. The commenter also places responsibility on herself/himself for not being more aware of the environment, which calls into play female consideration to “susceptible” situations. *Dyingtolivee87* offers the suggestion for group attentiveness and safeguarding when going out to bars or parties with inevitable strangers. The blogger further expresses that “the world is a fucked up place” because of the need to be leery and suspicious in public settings. While there is not a sense of paranoia, there is fear in knowing that date rape drugging and sexual assault is a violent everyday occurrence against women.

The following discussion was also present on the same *Oh No They Didn't* thread:

*Whispertowalkon*: Srsly. People stupid enough to set down their drinks in places like that deserve to get something in their drink.

*Bent\_lay*: you can have your drink in your hand, with your head turned, and someone can slip something in

*Whispertowalkon*: That is why I don't go to clubs in the first place.

*Kimberwyn*: Same here, but honestly it can happen in a restaurant, too.

*Whispertowalkon*: Yeah, very true.

*Drop\_and\_roll*: There was a story about that recently. I think the woman had gone to the toilet and the waiter saw the guy put something in the drink so he went and told the woman before she got back to the table and she kept the guy talking while the waiter phoned the police but it's scary to think what could have happened if the waiter hadn't seen.

*Kimberwyn*: I heard the first part of that. I didnt know about the rest, her stalling so that he could get arrested.

*Truthofthewords*: except when the bartender puts something in your drink. It happened to a friend of mine. She is really really cautious about her drink and she still got drugged.

*Kimberwyn*: Now THATS really scary. Did like someone pay him to do that??

*Truthofthewords*: i have no clue, I wasn't there that night. Her friends she was with got her out of there and brought her to the hospital.

*Whispertowalkon*: Oh my god, that's terrible. She was all right, right???

*Truthofthewords*: yea she had friends with her who took her to the hospital. I wasn't there but if I was I would have definitely kicked somebody's ass.

*Whispertowalkon*: Glad nothing worse happened. Yeah definitely, that is some fucked up shit. I hope that asshole got fired.

This example of internet cyberfeminism calls for denouncing common rape myths that litter our judgement. *Whispertowalkon* shares the patriarchal influenced notion of "she was asking for it" as a method of placing blame on the victim. For example, if a woman is wearing possibly suggestive clothing and is attacked, society easily accuses the woman for instigating sexual violence by presenting her body in a particular way. This of course, is a flawed, problematic way of condemning women without considering the messy factors responsible from society (such as patriarchy, gender violence, sexuality, power dynamics and masculinity).

Unfortunately, rape and sexual violence myths are widespread. *Whispertowalkon* states that people "deserve" to be drugged if a drink is left unattended and women are out at nightclubs. *Kimberwyn* and *bent\_lay* quickly point out problems with this superior, erroneous assumption. *Drop\_and\_roll* tells of a news story and *Truthofthewords* shares a friend's story that challenges *Whispertowalkon*'s mindset. Women should not be victimized and blamed for violence against them, nor should they live in seclusion for fear of attacks. *Whispertotalcon* participates in acknowledging the narrative and offers sympathy. Cyberfeminism is present here, as dominant ideologies of gendered violence are refuted for online audiences. This dialogue raises consciousness to criticize rape and sexual assault fabrications, as well as contribute related stories to reveal how many women are shaped by male violence.

Additional conversations occurred from *tabloidaddict*'s November 11, 2008 post on *Oh No They Didn't*:

*Its\_a\_thing*: why am I surprised that the female face of anti-feminism for our generation doesn't know what's acceptable dating behavior?

*Freeze\_i\_say*: well said

*Runnerlevelred*: Touché!

*Sbmusicangel*: “acceptable dating behavior”? wtf? You’re calling yourself a feminist and then saying that when someone gets drugged its their own fault... in the same breath?

*Viva\_colleen*: Giving Lauren fucking Conrad the title of anti-feminist of our generation? Blaming her for someone lacing her drink? GTFO

*Its\_a\_thing*: I didn't blame her for someone lacing her drink. I was referring to the quote which was referenced. The Hills is an extremely popular show for young people. 18-35 is the target, but there are plenty of female viewers younger than that. The Hills is downright toxic in terms of what it represents for women. Most of the characters work in fashion (girls can only cook, clean, and make clothes. it's an extension of the home maker angle which has been oppressing women for a very long time), and there other concerns mostly revolve around fighting with other women or dating guys. This is not the type of woman that I respect, nor the type that should be the face of young women today. I didn't call Lauren Conrad an anti-feminist ( I doubt she would call herself that either), I said that she was the face (one of many) of anti-feminism in that she is the central character of The Hills. Read my posts correctly and think about them before you reply to me.

*Polekatz*: To each their own and one can only respect your stance. Fact of the matter is Lauren, shown in a limited light on her show, has a life outside her show. She's made the most out of what she is given and continues to do so. Just felt like adding that bit in.

*Sassandthecity*: I'm glad Lauren's taking a stand and all of that but the idea of her doing something related to female empowerment is sort of funny when she stars on a show that essentially has all the female characters solely defined by the men in their lives.

*Lindashaaa*: well said

*Sbmusicangel* and *Viva\_colleen* come to Conrad’s (and arguably other women’s) defense by rejecting the post by *Its\_a\_thing*. The word “feminist” appears, meaning that it is a concept that these particular bloggers are familiar with and use in dialogue. Although women’s well-being and health are not strictly female-only interests, society often expects women to maintain responsibility of these issues. *Sbmusicangel* also rejects *Its\_a\_thing*’s judgmental comment inferring Conrad is “the female face of anti-feminism.” It is interesting that *Its\_a\_thing* chooses this comment, where Conrad is openly speaking out about violence against women, to disapprove of her degree of female

strength and self power; however, the blogger provides reasoning (heterosexism, traditional gender roles and female disrespect) to why the women of *The Hills* promote antifeminist rhetoric.

*Sassandthecity* defends *Its\_a\_thing*, insisting that it is absurd for Lauren to represent female empowerment because of her male-driven life on television. The bloggers understand that *The Hills*, although female-centered, may not demonstrate progressive gender play. Consequently, there are various types of feminism, encouraging individuals to create personalized definitions. In other words, feminist philosophy is elastic and encompasses countless affected areas. *Its\_a\_thing* may have an entirely different set of expectations to earn a “feminist” title as opposed to others. Different points of view and values should not only be encouraged, but expressed and discussed.

The following was displayed on the same *Oh No They Didn't* November 11, 2008 post concerning Conrad's experience with date rape drugs:

*Normalchick*: ah gawd this happened to my friend but she ended up getting raped. She was at a shouse party and her good friends boyfriend handed her a beer, she didn't think anything of it and it had something in it. He raped her while the party was going on, she woke up during it and passed right back out.

*Kerplunkburnout*: Omg what a disgusting asshole :(

*Pocketporn*: was she able to get any justice?

*Normalchick*: no, he was known as a good guy, good boyfriend got good grades and she was poor, had problems with her family and dropped out of school and she was afraid that they wouldn't believe her over him.

*Sweetbonyrose*: Awwwww man :( I absolutely HATE it when I hear stories like that (the guy was considered a good, all around guy, and the girl felt that noone would believe her). Did his girlfriend know about it? And how is your friend doing now? Why do guys (and girls) FEEL the NEED to do something like this??? I actually looked on the internet for articles about why men feel the need to rape...seriously, I was that curious. And I read some interesting things.

*Normalchick*: She never told his girlfriend, my friend stopped speaking to her and they drifted apart but my friend is okay now, this was years ago and she has received mental health help and she is coping well :)

\_\_\_*closetome*: I hope karma is real, that there's some justice in the universe. Men who rape deserve to know what it feels like to be sexually violated, a taste of their own medicine. edit: Ted Bundy was one of those guys too, the "good guy" shtick can't last forever.

*Normalchick* shares a story of a female friend being raped by her boyfriend at a party. *Pocketporn* asks if justice was served, as often many women do not report rape or judicial hurdles prevent perpetrators from accountability. Sadly, *Normalchick* tells the all-too-common story of doubt and apprehension from the victim. In the story, the girl is poor, from an "at-risk" home and fears that others would not believe her claim of sexual assault. The girl's boyfriend was a "good guy," a description that is utilized to excuse or lighten the severity of violence against women perpetuated by a patriarchal society.

\_\_\_*closetome* cheekily adds that serial murdered Ted Bundy was also a "good guy," meaning that individuals present themselves diversely in mixed company and can lead shocking private lives. "Good guys" can still commit brutal crimes. Violence against women has many different faces and personalities.

*Pink is the New Blog* posted on November 18, 2008 "The Hills- Heidi Finally Sees the Light?":

[Stacey](#): TRUEEEEE THAT (to everything said above). Really, I'm just sick of seeing weak women submit to douchey guys! Fortunately, I have an idea of what a \*real\* man has to offer. Where the hell are the nice guys?? Just when I thought Whitney was going to get involved with some sweet model (sounds like an oxymoron, I know) she runs off with some sleezy-but hot-musician and leaves good ol' whats-his-face in the dust! Anyhoo, I still watch. Mainly to make myself feel awesome about my relationship decision.

*Stacey* expresses her disappointment with the low standards women hold for the opposite sex. The characters on *The Hills* subscribe to heteronormativity, often left heartbroken and crying from lack of male communication. Not only does this post direct frustration towards women who settle for disrespectful relationships, it also calls for "nice guys" to come forward and have a larger presence in society. *Stacey* also equates receptiveness and respect with masculinity that a "real man" should exercise. Both parties are addressed, constructing an equal approach to addressing gender discrepancies.

Unfortunately, there is still the expression of sexism and violence online just as in reality. On November 11, 2008, *The Superficial* posted a thread titled “Audrina Patridge in a Bikini”:

*CelebrityNewsIsUseless*: I'm not sure where many of you get your beauty standards. But she's beautiful. The picking about the deviated boobs and the torso-to-legs proportion is fairly minor. There's literally hundreds of different attributes that make up a person's physical beauty. She hits most of them. And it wouldn't surprise me if most of the highly negative comments are made by women. Your gender after all loves to tear each other apart when it comes to looks.

*Rob*: Not gonna lie, I'd hit it, alot. boobs ain't perfect but that won't matter when she's gagging.

This exceptionally chauvinist post is simply multiple photographs of Patridge in a skimpy bikini at the beach. She is not looking at the camera, giving the impression that the pictures were taken without her knowledge; this voyeuristic behavior is exploiting the female body, as well as creating sexual undertones of the “male gaze.” Many of the posts scorn Patridge’s body and refer to her as a “slut” and “whore.” *CelebrityNewsIsUseless* denounces previous critical comments, calling for a reevaluation of beauty standards for women. The blogger also suggests that many of the negative posts are made by women, since females love to “tear each other apart when it comes to looks.” Girl-on-girl cruelty is cyclical and is strongly present during adolescent years when female adolescents are attempting to find their voice in the world. This comment entails female competition and women’s intolerance of other women, which is a built upon patriarchy and societal expectations. For example, body image issues have many women insecure and lacking confidence, causing vulnerability around other women who may invoke self-doubting or threatening behavior just by mere presence. Women are pit against each other for male attention by sexist parameters produced by white, upper-class, heterosexual men decades ago. *CelebrityNewsIsUseless* is pointing out the ludicrousness of today’s modern woman playing into a power structure that is intended to damage female sense of self.

*Rob* uses violent imagery in the language used on this website post. By choosing the phrase “hit it” to imply sexual activity, aggression and phallic dominance is expressed towards Patridge, as well as other women. This is elevated even further when *Rob*

expresses the desire to “gag” Patridge during fellacio. Gagging involves unwanted force; therefore, this comment could be considered promotion of sexual violence against women. The utter disregard for the sexual well-being of women is casually typed and broadcast into cyberspace. Internet culture reflects patriarchal values instilled into society, which is why it is not surprising that this derogatory language and hostility is found on blogs. Obviously, this language and behavior may hinder some women from participating in online discourse to avoid internet victimization. Although cyberfeminism is apparent on celebrity gossip blogs in this study, there are also destructive commentary strewn across archives.

## CHAPTER 4 - Conclusion

Media have adapted with advances in technology and progressive audiences. Some scholars refer to present-day media as “post-feminist,” or that previous ideas of feminism from the second-wave movement are unrelated to current gender struggles. As Douglas (2002) audaciously explains:

What the hell is postfeminism, anyway? I would think it would refer to a time when complete gender equality has been achieved. That hasn't happened, of course, but we (especially young women) are supposed to think it has. Postfeminism, as a term, suggests that women have made plenty of progress because of feminism, but that feminism is now irrelevant and even undesirable because it has made millions of women unhappy, unfeminine, childless, lonely, and bitter. (p. 1)

There has been a lack of compassion for certain achieved second-wave feminism goals (such as improvements in the workplace environment and reproductive rights), it is argued here that feminism is nonetheless relevant. For example, while there are currently stricter sexual harassment laws and attainable (arguably) contraceptives, there are still forces working against these social advancements. Women still receive unequal pay for equivalent work and government officials are placing complicated, sexist regulations on women's pregnant bodies.

Feminism is operating under new guidelines and strategies that are a result of technological advances (social media, cyberspace, technological advances and accessibility, etc.) and the increased magnitude of mass media. Internet studies is a developing field lacking adequate research and exploration. Feminist thought is present, yet goes unnoticed for lack of identification. Languages used to shape and recognize first, second and third-wave feminist movements vary; therefore, one cannot expect to find replicas of thoughts and practices. Of course, there are similar themes, but how one expresses interest, names critical issues or raises consciousness differs. This is not to say that first and second-wave terminology is outdated, but reappropriated and applied to new (as well as continuous prior) struggles. This is also a unifying factor of the feminist



movement by creating solidarity, as multiple views and experiences are opened and shared with others. One problem with the lack of current feminist recognition is that feminists active in previous movements are critiquing current media, such as cyberfeminism. It will require an involved woman educated in contemporary feminist theory and media studies without biases of previous feminist movements. Feminism is still a relevant social advancement, but may be tailored to better assist and become assessable to new voices wanting to practice this rhetoric.

Feminist author Levy describes the sexualization of society and culture as “raunch culture.”

The proposition that having the most simplistic, plastic stereotypes of female sexuality constantly reiterated throughout our culture somehow proves that we are sexually liberated and personally empowered has been offered it to us, and we have accepted it. (Levy, p. 197)

Some feminists consider the increased emphasis of sexual liberation and agency confining to female equality and gender improvement. This empowerment is actually feeding into the patriarchal machine of sexual exploitation. “Raunch culture” is more complicated than females on *Girls Gone Wild* flashing their breasts to videocameras in an act of “sexual freedom” from male power. Considering that many posts feature words like “slut” and “whore” to insult *Hills* characters, there is a hypersexualization of society present on cyberspace; however, girl-on-girl verbal sexual attacks are nothing new. Girls’ responsibly to supervise sexuality (example: virgin/whore binary) serves as double-standard to men.

“Raunch culture” is actually a catalyst for a possible fourth-wave feminist movement as a response to crafted manipulation of feminist agendas by patriarchal systems enforced in society. This actually serves as a double-edged sword: once women create and enforce new feminist practices, society has the ability to revise this work and eventually use the same rhetoric to exploit through various institutions (such as mass media). Celebrity gossip blogs perpetuates this concept by offering the convergence of exploitive media. In this case, female sexual liberation is now a promiscuous performance that fuels patriarchal sexual objectification. Technological advances only

increase this ability to quickly and widely transfer abusive ideas, which is why the presence of cyberfeminism is not only necessary, but also a natural reaction.

Variables such as gender, age, and education, have an effect on the level of cultivation from television viewing. The cultivation model strongly affects particular audience groups, such as female beauty standards, supervision of sexuality and female gender roles. The women in *The Hills* all serve as examples of how to physically appear and femininely act like an “ideal woman” by strict dominant standards of society. Therefore, these women are serving as icons for younger girls to imitate and further fuel patriarchal power structures. While the characters may never discuss the actual process or tips for mastering female gender roles and play, nonverbal cues are evident in their actions. Women are portrayed socially as second-class citizens, exploiting their sexuality and body. Since there are more cues for women to follow (such as dieting, clothing and cosmetics), females are more susceptible to images of women in media. While there were arguments against the cultivation of reality from *The Hills*, females are bound by the power of hegemonic values and cultural inequalities. These factors shape, both deliberately and subconsciously, women’s language, actions and demeanor to a certain extent.

Power systems are online, meaning cyberspace is not egalitarian. Blogs link to other websites, creating supremacy and a louder voice for certain groups. Established blogs, such as the ones used in this research, have hyperlinks to other celebrity gossip blogs online, creating a network of media and news. Because these sites often link to similar sources and feature related daily updates, moderators (such as on *Perez Hilton*) quickly become an authoritative specialized producer of information online. This is a challenge for new creators of online content to advance in popularity. Gossip blogs network together with other large, reputable multimedia sites, limiting the exposure of smaller upcoming blogs. The connection, then, is that smaller blogs created by underrepresented voices (which is what cyberfeminism encourages) can be stifled. Additionally, successful gossip blogs generate revenue from advertisement and banners spewed across the pages. The more advertisers, the more bandwidth can be purchased, therefore increased website visitors. It is not surprising, then, that sites with the most revenue often receive the most exposure and popularity. Additionally, the moderator also

can earn capital from her/his online production of information, challenging older ideas of journalistic practices.

All but one of the blogs had the authoritative voice of a moderator. For example, *Perez Hilton* and *D-Listed* provide snarky commentary from site content controllers when stories are posted online. Many of the remarks have rude undertones about intelligence, physical appearance and attitude. This attitude is described by Fairclough (2008) as “Bitch culture”:

The "Bitch culture" that exists within the gossip blog does not operate to celebrate women who exude such traits, but to continually denigrate them. Bloggers often adopt the traits traditionally associated with the term; they are outspoken, flout codes of courtesy and are fiercely opinionated. (p. 1)

This may increase or invoke critical responses from both female and male blog commenters. Additionally, it should be noted that all of the authored blogs in this study are compiled by males. It could be argued that although more women and/or girls are entering cyberspace, they are still excluded as powerful controllers and producers of online blog content. Females are reading male-produced information and visiting male-produced spaces online, which is a reflection of dominant patriarchal society and gendered power structures. The majority of posts were made about the female characters (Conrad, Montag, Patridge and Port) on *The Hills*. While there were multiple posts about the couple Pratt and Montag, only two posts from the entire data focused on Brody Jenner and his heterosexual romance with high profile women.

The blog updates about the females were prominent topics such as attractiveness in bikinis and fashion mishaps. Celebrity gossip blogs police women’s bodies to enforce hegemonic values of femininity, creating a distinction between blogs posts and commentary. Like other media outlets, blogs contain derogatory discourse of traditional second-class ideals for women.

Female stars and celebrities, whether perceived as traditionally "talented" or not, are no longer held up as models to aspire to unless they rigidly conform to this limited range of representational tropes. With bitch rhetoric increasingly dominating everyday commentary regarding female celebrities, the rhetoric of postfeminist hostility and judgment is truly in action. (Fairclough, 2008, p. 1)

It is important to note that internet users establish a role and position in online communities. Like any environment, certain avatars may establish a greater presence and gain more authority over a community by participation, communication and activity. By becoming a regular visitor to a website, one begins to understand the “unspoken rules” of each blogging neighborhood. There are members who make multiple posts and are considered “regulars” on the site, networking and “friending” other bloggers. Of course, it is easy to see power structures online, as those most comfortable posting become dominant and responsible for the community atmosphere. There is a cliquish attitude that some avatars have with one another, often holding conversational inside jokes on message boards. Cyberspace mirrors reality in the sense that those with more privilege (computer access, disposable time, disposable expenses and technological knowledge) have greater power and influence. Many voices not only have the opportunity to participate in online arenas, but also are shut out of or discriminated against in cyber communities.

Web 2.0 is developing paradigm shift cyberspace. Because user-generated media relies on person-to-person (P2P) communication, bloggers must interact and create dialogue with each other. Not only are online users open to a realm of options online, but individuals also have a chance for participatory learning. Websites offer options to acquire additional information or research areas of interest. Users are responsible for typing keywords, steering through database entries and cultivating knowledge. Cyberspace is non-linear and non-homogeneous, which is why different views and commentary exist in this arena. Blogs are not simply self-gratifying podiums, but contribute to a vast catalog of information for users to interact with. An important illustration of this argument is the prominence of political dialogue on celebrity gossip blogs. November was the politically-charged month of the Obama/McCain presidential election and bloggers attached opinions and beliefs regarding the state of the nation. The most discussed political topic was California’s Proposition 8 concerning legally recognizing same-sex unions. This feature has increased the importance of cyberspace in society. “As social software (blogs, podcasts, and wikis are just three examples) matures, it presents more opportunities for learners to participate actively in their own learning”

(Seitzinger, 2006, p.1). Adolescent girls may search for sexual education online to assist in identity development due to governmental suppression through abstinence-only teachings in schools across the United States. Because educational opportunities are not equal, the internet is a viable alternative to self-sufficiently locate information.

*The Hills* is understood to be a staged, edited television program on MTV. Although advertised and marketed as reality TV, viewers understand that the storylines are created from scripted dialogues and post-production. This is an important development, as girls are not looking to *The Hills* to construct life experiences and do not expect similar events in their future. Gerbner found that those with heavy television habits perceive the world to be similar to programs that s/he regularly watches to support the cultivation theory. This is not necessarily true from the blogs comments analyzed for this study. Bloggers acknowledge distance between *The Hills* characters and their lifestyles. Although the cultivation theory is not intended to be used to interpret individual programs and their effects, it does give insight to attitudes of how audiences perceive the world in which we live. Viewers understand *The Hills* was cast like other programs, and characters are extremely privileged; far from the “ordinary, common people” myth that networks exudes. If audiences understand this promotion of reality television as fake, will television networks change entertainment formatting? Viewers are not personally connecting with the white, upper-class, heterosexual females on *The Hills*, suggesting the need for new content for larger, more applicable audiences.

Bloggers construct an interesting dynamic of fandom from their online dialogue. Although *The Hills* is recognized as un-relatable from celebrity gossip blog comments, it is still a top-rated cable reality show. Furthermore, most of the comments in this study were critical of the characters on the program, often using disapproving and judgmental language. This “love to hate” attitude places *The Hills* into an interesting category. Are viewers who abhor the program online still considered fans? What pleasures and gratifications are they receiving from actively watching the reality show and bashing the content? When the cultivation theory is applied to this study, “typicality,” the stance that media represents events or characteristics that are typical of a particular population, was prevalent over “factuality,” the perception that media truthfully represents an actual event or person. Bloggers believe that *The Hills* could portray the wealthy lifestyle of those

who reside in Beverly Hills, California, but is not a fair illustration of girl culture. This idea is expressed via comments criticizing the staged production of the program, as well as the special treatment and benefits (such as magazine coverage) *The Hills* girls receive.

To dismiss *The Hills* as a “guilty pleasure” for females would be flawed, as there is a complex dichotomy at play. Perhaps girls enjoy watching the show because it helps establish opposition against hegemonic values, create media literacy and understanding of mass media gatekeeping. By watching the traditional ideology on television, females can then blog about competing beliefs and receive feedback supporting (or arguing against) claims. *The Hills* could be successful due to the adolescent trend in blogging and internet participation. Cultivation research indicates that media is more influential for those lacking first-hand experience with a topic. Because it is already established that bloggers establish distance from the “reality” exposed on the program (infinite spending, mass media coverage, etc.), some viewers may be using *The Hills* as an example of how wealthy, privileged, white, heterosexual women live. It is apparent, though, that *The Hills* is not a compass for girls’ development and maturity, as many comments criticized the actions and persona of characters. This could possibly be explained as psychological suppression of desire of *Hills* lifestyles. While women and girls will inevitably cultivate female-branded tasks incessantly endorsed by a patriarchal power structure, *The Hills* is not necessarily only used as a tool for influential gender conformity. As apparent in blog commentary, females have the ability to accept, negotiate or reject images and roles promoted on the reality television show. Because of user feedback online, media is no longer a one-way, top-down dispersion.

This research is a contribution to the field of media studies (especially pertaining to internet studies) that incorporates both feminist and cultural theories. With the development of new technologies comes the transformation of how we communicate and what vehicles are used to express this communication. Cyberspace is an evolving platform that is changing how society interacts, creating power dynamics, controlling information and allowing the publication of ideas and opinions. Cyberfeminism is an example of how a social movement and ideology can be modernized and further promoted to new audiences with technological advancements.

There is also a lack of research concerning how adolescent girls are interacting with new media and convergence. Many websites are specific to building girlhood culture in cyberspace, often providing age-appropriate language, activities and knowledge. Because there is a lack of “policing” or authoritative monitoring online, many girls and/or adolescents are exploring adult trafficked sites. This raises interesting questions, such as how girls are navigating advanced themes and premises. Does this exposure and virtual media literacy accelerate femininity or maturity in girls? Arguably, teenage females have always associated with media not intended for them, such as R-rated films, to find wisdom during this developing life stage. The internet, however, complicates this notion by providing multiple readings and endless material instantaneously. Furthermore, with computers as a new addition to previous bedroom culture, girls can now function in various worlds of reality; however, there are still concerns with how girls can participate safely.

Internet access is not necessarily destructive for girls, as argued in this study. Cyberspace offers a remarkable opportunity for participatory learning and exchange, which may be especially meaningful for females. Because many new bloggers are teenage girls, one could claim that this population is reappropriating the masculine construction of the internet. Sexism, racism, classism and heterosexism are only a few examples of discrimination and dominant ideologies that society upholds, yet girls are thriving in cyberspace. Not to say that these factors are null in virtual reality, but online users can choose (which is a key in internet studies) which websites to frequent and virtual communities to join. The influences and new products of female youth culture being fostered online appear hopeful, as well as how these additions are translated into real world experiences.

Limitations for this project are central to the ambiguity of online identities. The internet provides an opportunity to “try on” and experiment with various characters or personalities. An online user may deceptively hide or exaggerate identity, making absolute identification difficult, if not impossible. One coded as “female” in cyberspace may have an alternative self in the real world. Dean (2000) asks, “if we couldn't see who we were talking to, how could we trust them?” (p. 10). Obviously, all genders are audience members for *The Hills* and have access to gossip blog websites. It is possible

that more comments are made by males; however, since female audiences are larger for the reality show, I expect to see this reflected in blogging. Lack of gender binaries online is an original praise of founding cyberfeminist theorists; therefore “gender play” in avatar identity is strongly encouraged.

Because this study is only considering blogs for a month-long span of November 1 through 30, 2008, further studies may want to examine trends and popularity of blogging websites. Research could display the transformation of reactions to the show, now in its fifth season, through archiving discourse. The work can also separate comments related to the actual show *The Hills* from those concerned with character behavior off-screen. A greater sample of celebrity gossip blogs would result in ample data to collect a larger pool of information about blog construction and user relationships.

Only two blog posts primarily focused on male *Hills* characters (excluding Pratt, who was always featured with Montag in posts), as opposed to the countless featuring their female counterparts. Research can look at the varying language used to identify “newsworthy” actions between males and females and compare how they differ. How meanings are constructed and understood will differ between genders. In addition to the language and presentation of male-centered blog posts by moderators, I predict language and comments by avatars will reflect the change in tone. Furthermore, comments can be analyzed to study how commenters interact with each other to further explain cyber communities. Hostile language, for example, should be further studied to understand how aggression and violence affects the sense of “virtual villages” and how it is managed by other blog users.

Because cyberfeminism was a focus of this study, further research can carefully look at how gender representation changes online. How much identity is comfortably shared in cyberspace and how does this factor in social movements, such as feminism? How do technological advances help or hurt feminist ideologies and who benefits or is burdened? There is a lack of exploration of web studies due to its novelty; however, with the internet shaping medias and mass communication, it is becoming increasingly imperative to be knowledgeable on this subject.

Additional research could include one-on-one research with online users who participate in blogging. Online interviews would provide access to specific answers for



key concepts and questions. Direct communication would also allow for dialogue in relation to females and webspace, including current anxieties and future directions. Are young female bloggers creating a new subculture? How has “fandom” transformed over television genres and online fields? What are some individual opinions of the lives portrayed on *The Hills* and why or why not do they relate? Is the program absorbed beyond entertainment purposes?

Additionally, blogs could also be used for market research, as posts are an immediate, “honest” look at individual thoughts and opinions. Advertising and marketing agencies would have the opportunity to peer into the youth audiences to discover age appropriate trends. Because these fads are ever-changing, blogs would be an appropriate, as well as abundant, tool to stay current with marketing to adolescents.

While previous research reviewed what blog moderators or creators were producing, little is critically known about the conversations and dialogue exchanged on internet forums and message boards. This information just as valuable, as it provides insight to how audiences are interacting with medias. Teenage girls are using this space for multiple intentions, which is valuable information to not only cultural theory, but also media marketing. A flux in gender representations and traditional gender ideologies may be rallied for online. As is apparent in this research, female bloggers are not “buying into” hegemonic structures outlined by media gatekeepers. Many are also aware of inequalities and power dynamics working against women that are portrayed in television, disrupting some aspects of the cultivation theory. Cyberfeminism as a form of resistance, then, exists in various forms. The “boob tube” is not only mindless dribble fed to the masses, but can serve as a source to inspire higher-level thoughts of social action and praxis. Is this the beginning of a format change in mass medias and a possible advancement in progressive societal practices? While that stance is eagerly idealistic, girlhood cultures and technology are transforming how information is acquired and transmitted, revising traditional cultural hegemonies and creating multiple opportunities for dialogue and communication exchange on micro and macro levels.

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