

BEING A GIRL: HOW YOUNG GIRLS RESPOND TO SOCIAL MESSAGES

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine the research question: How does the application of response-based practice theory to the responses of female identifying youth inform professionals who support them? Four female identifying youth aged 12 to 13 completed an open-ended questionnaire that invited them to report the social messages they receive about female gender stereotypes, together with how they respond to these messages. A thematic analysis was used to analyze and group both the social messages the participants receive and their responses to these messages. The latent themes identified about the social messages the youth receive include *subordination*, *strength*, *beauty*, *body appearance*, and *behaviour*. The semantic subthemes identified about the social messages the youth receive include, *need*, *not*, and *be*. The latent themes identified about how participants respond to social messages include *expose*, *withstand*, *repel*, *abstain*, and *approve*. The findings indicate the youth are active responders, who employ a variety of actions to resist the social messages they perceive as unjust. A discussion of the findings brings attention to the significance of using a response-based practice lens to understand the influence of social messages, and the myriad ways youth can respond to these messages. Implications for supporting youth who are navigating social messages of gendered expectations are presented.

Keywords: Case study, thematic analysis, qualitative, response-based practice, youth, agency, responses, social messages, female, stereotypes, expectations, resistance.

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BEING A GIRL: HOW YOUNG GIRLS RESPOND

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my grandfather who has been the most influential mentor in my life. My grandfather always encouraged me to pursue my education, and I am saddened that he did not have the opportunity to see me through this part of my educational journey. My grandfather was never one to go along with the status quo. He inspired me to always stay true to my ideas, while at the same time keeping an open mind about other possibilities. Thank you Grandpa, for always inspiring me to pursue my passions. I am forever grateful to have had you for a grandfather.

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Chapter One

Children and adolescents are often cast as passive recipients of their environments (Katz, 2015; Richardson & Bonnah, 2015; Vogel, 2017). Societal discourses tend to construct them as incomplete and vulnerable beings, who lack the capacity to act as active agents in their lives (Hauge, Mullender, Kelly, Imam, & Malos, 2002; Houghton, 2015; Richardson & Bonnah, 2015; Vogel, 2017). This framework of viewing youth as passive recipients of their environments feeds the notion of an effects-based understanding of their responses, or in other words, the idea that they are affected or impacted by their experiences (Richardson & Wade, 2010; Richardson & Bonnah, 2015). An effects-based lens supports a deficiency-based model of viewing youths' responses to events, as symptoms or negative attributes of youth, in which they require rescuing from or treatment for their symptoms (Richardson & Bonnah, 2015; Vogel, 2017).

Effects-Based Perspective

Effects-based language is understood as any figure of speech, linguistic device, term or metaphor that suggests a person's actions or subjective experiences are an effect of a cause (Wade, 2002). It is not uncommon to hear young persons' actions or subjective experiences talked about in ways that cast their responses as negative *effects* or symptoms *caused by* particular events (Richardson & Bonnah, 2015). For example, Richardson and Bonnah (2015), who are proponents of response-based practice, assert that in situations of violence in the home, a young person's expressions of sadness, despair, or even anger are often seen as negative *effects* or symptoms *caused by* 'witnessing' violence in the home. This way of viewing a young person's responses as *effects of a cause* de-contextualizes the situation in which the young person is responding, and further conceals the young person's agency or ability to respond as an active agent (Richardson & Bonnah, 2015).

Other advocates of the response-based practice orientation, Renoux and Wade (2008), argue that the use of cause-and-effect language befits descriptions of the movement of objects, which when struck by an external force will move in trajectories pre-determined by the laws of physics. Applying such language to the ways in which humans act, however, suggests human beings are only capable of a pre-determined set of actions (Renoux & Wade, 2008). This notion conceals the complexities within the ways humans respond, and neglects to consider both the human capacity for social awareness and the human ability to assign meaning to lived experiences (Renoux & Wade, 2008).

With the rise of social media, there has been an increased interest in exploring how young girls are influenced by social messages conveyed by society (Eyal & Te'eni-Harari, 2013; Perloff, 2014; Romo et al., 2016; Slater, Halliwell, Jarman, & Gaskin, 2017). A significant amount of literature has demonstrated that young girls are exposed to messages, through social media as well as from society at large, that cultivate unrealistic expectations concerning how young girls are to act, behave, think, or feel (Eyal & Te'eni-Harari, 2013; Perloff, 2014; Romo et al., 2016; Slater et al., 2017). A common theme within the literature suggests young girls are affected or impacted by the social messages they are exposed to, thereby leading them to experience negative psychological outcomes such as anxiety, depression, 'disordered eating,' 'dysfunctional body image' perceptions, and reduced self-esteem (Eyal & Te'eni-Harari, 2013; Perloff, 2014; Romo et al., 2016; Slater et al., 2017).

To say young girls are affected or impacted by the unjust nature of the social messages they receive from society is to suggest they are passive recipients of their environments (Renoux & Wade, 2008; Richardson & Bonnah, 2015). Not only are these young girls depicted as passive recipients, but the use of such effects-based language deems the *effects* of anxiety, depression,

disordered eating, dysfunctional body image perceptions, and reduced self-esteem, as inevitable end states or attributes of identity (Richardson & Bonnah, 2015; Wade, 2002). The developer of response-based practice theory, Wade (2002), states that in psychotherapy there is generally a focus on treating these effects, which are often regarded as pathology or deficiency within a person. By situating the effects as internalized within the person, there is a risk of overlooking important information about the contextual elements of what it is the person is responding to (Richardson & Bonnah, 2015; Wade, 2002). In focusing on effects, the ways in which people respond with strategic acts of resistance against the adverse circumstances they face are concealed (Coates & Wade, 2007; Richardson & Bonnah, 2015; Wade, 2002). In casting young girls' responses of anxiety, depression, disordered eating, dysfunctional body image perceptions, and reduced self-esteem as *effects* of the unjust nature of the gendered social messages they receive, the myriad ways young girls act with resistance against these messages are concealed (Coates & Wade, 2007).

Response-Based Perspective

The notion of young girls *responding with resistance* stems from a response-based practice theory lens that recognizes that any mental or behavioural act that is strategically used by a person to oppose, evade, strive against, stop, prevent, or impede any form of violence, oppression, or injustices a person faces is a response of resistance (Coates & Wade, 2007; Renoux & Wade, 2008; Wade, 1997; Wade, 2002). These responses may be overt or covert acts, yet nonetheless demonstrate a person's inherent ability to respond in intelligible ways to protect her dignity and sense of self (Wade, 1997).

Wade (2002) writes that the language of responses elicits vastly different answers than those of effects-based language. Using effects-based language one might ask a person, "How are

you *affected* by the social messages of female gender stereotypes operating in our society?” The use of this cause-and-effect language assumes the interaction is unilateral, that is, the person is passive and is acted upon by external forces, which in turn conceals the person’s strategic acts of resistance (Coates & Wade, 2007; Wade, 2002). On the other hand, using response-based language one might ask the person, “How do you respond to the social messages of female gender stereotypes operating in our society?” This question assumes the individual is an active responding agent, and it attends to the vast array of acts a person will engage in to oppose external forces and preserve personal dignity (Wade, 2002). A response-based practice lens aims to re-contextualize situations of adversity, in order to elucidate the myriad ways a person responds with agency as well as resistance to reveal the situational logic of the person’s behaviours (Renoux & Wade, 2008; Richardson & Bonnah, 2015; Wade, 2002). Acknowledging the ways in which people respond serves to elucidate and honour the strengths, resourcefulness, and creativity they carry (Hauge et al., 2002; Överlien & Hyden, 2009; Renoux & Wade, 2008; Richardson & Bonnah, 2015; Vogel, 2017; Wade, 2002).

Societal Discourses

In examining the context within which young girls are responding to the influence of societal discourses of female-gendered expectations, it is essential to consider the sociocultural climate within which these discourses are constructed and maintained. Several researchers argue that within the North American culture persons from a young age are influenced by societal constructs that maintain a certain set of gender binary roles and expectations (Brinkman, Brinkman, & Toomey, 2011; Dohnt, 2006; Shapiro, et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2014; Wister & McPherson, 2014). These socially constructed norms are bound within institutionalized structures of education, political systems, ideologies, and media that continue to uphold a

patriarchal system of dominance (Brinkman et al., 2011; Burstow, 1992; Dohnt, 2006; Shapiro, et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2014; Wister & McPherson, 2014).

From injustices within school systems that purport gender nuanced dress codes (e.g., hem length, conservative dress), to beauty ideals propagated through media (e.g., thin yet curvy, flawless complexion), to expectations about careers (e.g., nursing, teaching, waitressing) and family roles (e.g., housewife, caretaker), young girls are influenced to behave, think, and feel according to assumptions that align with a patriarchal system of understanding (Brinkman et al., 2011; Burstow, 1992; Dohnt, 2006; Shapiro, et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2014; Wister & McPherson, 2014). Young boys are also living within such a system, and as Brinkman et al. (2011) and Reynolds (2014) argue, young boys did not invent patriarchy; instead they are navigating the waters of a system that serves to disadvantage certain members of society. Rather than shifting blame and shame toward those who continue to uphold the oppressive structures in society, there must be an effort to hold those individuals accountable for their actions (Reynolds, 2014). Transforming the culture of patriarchy and the corresponding attitudes and values put forth by society is nonetheless an enormous task. Thus, in an effort to shift the system, these discourses must be challenged and there must also be a shift to holding the agency and dignity of people at the forefront (Reynolds, 2014).

Empowerment is a word often used to encourage young girls and women to draw on their personal strengths in order to achieve what it is they desire (Brinkman et al., 2011). Brinkman et al. (2011) state the concept of *empowering* young girls suggests young girls inherently carry insufficient power. While the notion that young girls carry insufficient power exists, it is important to recognize that through the constructive powers of language and

discourse certain narratives are promoted in society that serve to conceal the power young girls *do* carry (Coates & Wade, 2007).

Coates and Wade (2007) argue resistance is ubiquitous: that is, when a person is faced with oppression, violence, or any adverse circumstance in which the person's sense of dignity or self is attacked, the person will inevitably resist. In fact, there is an array of evidence that demonstrates young girls resist against the injustices of gendered social expectations. For example, in the 1960s young girls collectively engaged in civil acts of disobedience by participating in anti-conformity protests as well as sit-ins on occupational school board meetings, to oppose gender nuanced dress code requirements (Lovell, 2016). Other studies have shown young girls adapt their behaviours in order to be perceived in certain ways (Pomerantz et al., 2013). Some studies have also demonstrated young girls selectively choose whom they speak to about their concerns with body image, so as to minimize the risk of having a particular person cast shame toward them (Romo et al., 2016).

Personal Connection

Through my experiences of interacting with youth, in both mentoring and therapeutic settings, I have come to see them as actively responding agents. In my role as mentor and co-facilitator of a number of girls' groups as well as in my role as counsellor, I have conversations with young girls in which they are invited to share how they respond to the challenges they face. For instance, I ask them what they do, what they say, what they think, and how they feel in response to a given situation. Through each and every conversation, I have heard how these girls use creativity, imagination, strength, and determination to resist the unjust circumstances in their lives. I have witnessed their agency, capability, and resourcefulness.

I am inspired to explore how young girls respond to social messages of female gender expectations. This inspiration comes from the ways I have heard many practitioners, teachers, educators, and parents speak about how young girls have been affected or impacted by social messages they receive from society. The ways in which these persons speak about young girls often serve to recast the girls' responses of worry, anxiety, low mood, discomfort, and irritability, as negative symptoms that imply a deficiency within them. I think this manner of speaking about girls does a disservice to the work that can be done to support them. It concerns me that far too often the light shines on these deficiencies, and this bias leads me to my research question: How does the application of response-based practice theory to the responses of female identifying youth inform professionals who support them?

Purpose of the Study

A gap in the existing literature occurs in understanding how young girls *respond* to the social messages of what it means to be a female living in a particular society. Therefore, the intent of this research study is to invite deeper insight into the myriad ways young girls respond, and to honour their agency, capability, and resourcefulness. Those who might be interested in this research include child and youth practitioners, counsellors, teachers, educators, parents, youth, and anyone else interested in a different perspective. This study uses a qualitative case study design with a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), in order to explore how girls aged 12 to 13 respond to the social messages of female gender stereotypes operating within their particular society.

Throughout this thesis, the terms 'young girls' and 'female gender' are used interchangeably to refer to the experiences of female identifying youth. Gender is considered a socially constructed concept that refers to discourses operating within society that characterize

certain roles and expectations of behaviour that females and males are to carry (Wister & McPherson, 2014). Similarly in this thesis, the terms ‘stereotypes’ and ‘expectations’ are used interchangeably to refer to the discourses that relate to the social constructions of gender. The term ‘social messages’ refers to the discourses maintained by a given society that define what it means to be female or male (Wister & McPherson, 2014).

It must be acknowledged that the scope of this study is limited to one particular group of adolescents in a specific demographic region of south Vancouver Island. Thus, the social messages alluded to in this study pertain to the specific historical, political, and cultural contexts of the particular demographic region. Although the scope of this research focuses on the identity factor of female, I wish to acknowledge that the use of gender binary language serves to minimize and dismiss the experiences of people who identify as transgender or gender variant (Reynolds, 2014).

Methodology

The qualitative approach of a thematic analysis was selected for this case study, as such an approach enables the researcher to examine and identify patterned themes that relate to the ways in which persons’ realities, meanings, or experiences are influenced by the discourses operating within society (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The theoretical underpinning of the thematic analysis supports a response-based practice orientation. Consistent with the premise of this research, which is to honour and acknowledge the agency youth carry, the narratives of young girls are used in this study. Twelve-to-thirteen-year-old girls were invited to share how they respond to social messages of what it is like to be a girl living in their society. A thematic analysis is used to identify themes within their responses, in order to elucidate the ways in which the girls respond.

Because this study involves only one researcher there is a risk of bias. Accordingly, two individuals other than the researcher reviewed the identified themes and the rationale provided.

This study is meant to provide insight into the experiences of a particular group of girls within their social context. The narratives of this group provide insight into the girls' specific situation. Future researchers might ask the same kinds of questions of other groups, or at least consider that there may be alternative perspectives.

Chapter two is comprised of a review of the current literature that explores the influences of social media and gendered societal expectations in the lives of youth, as well as how youth respond in situations of adversity. Chapter three provides a comprehensive overview of the methodology used in the study. In chapter four the identified themes from the study are presented. Finally, chapter five offers a discussion on the themes, as they relate to the research question and the literature. Chapter five also includes a discussion about implications of the analysis, limitations of the study, and future directions.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Before I examine how the application of response-based practice theory to the responses of female identifying youth informs professionals, it is necessary to review the current literature that addresses how young people make meaning and respond to gender-specific discourses operating in society. The Internet databases used to complete the literature review include Google Scholar, City University of Seattle's Library, and the British Columbia Ministry of Children and Family Development's health and human services library. The search terms include *societal influences, gender stereotypes, young girls, adolescent female, responses, effects, body image ideals, advertising, social media, youth agency, and response-based practice.*

This chapter reviews first the current literature that investigates the prevalence of the social messages of gender stereotypes that are embedded within the various social structures of society. Second, the chapter reviews the literature that surveys how youth are influenced by the social messages of female gender expectations; and third, it provides a review of the literature that examines youth agency. Because an assumption of this research study is the idea that youth are active responders (Hauge et al., 2002; Houghton, 2015; Richardson & Bonnah, 2015; Vogel, 2017), a response-based practice lens is applied throughout the literature review, to examine critically the position the existing research takes in understanding young peoples' responses. The final section conveys some implications of the literature review and develops the conceptual framework for this study.

Societal Messages

From a young age, children are immersed in societies that maintain gender binary discourses. A collection of academic literature demonstrates that through advertising and the marketing of consumer items (e.g., toys, clothing, and household items), as well as through

media portrayals of characters in television shows, movies, and advertisements, children as young as three begin to construct stereotypical definitions of what it means to be a girl or a boy (Auster & Mansbach, 2012; Freeman, 2007; Mager & Helgeson, 2010). Some of the research that explores the gender marketing of children's toys indicates that gender marketing influences not only children's, but also adults' perceptions of gender differences, which further influences how meaning is attributed to the gendering of household duties, recreational interests, career aspirations, familial roles, and behaviour nuances (Freeman, 2007; Mager & Helgeson, 2010).

A study conducted by Freeman (2007) from the University of South Carolina suggests that while parents encourage cross-gendered play and behaviours for their children, their children believe that gender-typical play and behaviours are how they are expected to behave. Auster and Mansbach (2012), from the Department of Sociology at Franklin and Marshall College, demonstrate that children as young as three have the ability to distinguish between feminine toys (e.g., dolls, princesses, cooking sets) and masculine toys (e.g., cars, action figures, Legos, video games). The researchers argue this understanding of the toys as either 'girl toys' or 'boy toys' has arisen from the ways in which children's toys are marketed: for example, they are often categorized based on gender-specific links on websites, or by gender segregated aisles in retail stores (Auster & Mansbach, 2012). These patterns of gendering toys, play, and recreational activities nonetheless inform how children make meaning of gender. Although both studies reveal that parental influence plays a role in guiding children's perceptions of gender, it seems traditional gender stereotypes learned from social platforms (e.g., media, television, Internet, marketing, advertisements) carry significant influence on how young children understand their gender.

Other researchers identify themes within advertising that both implicitly and explicitly suggest stereotypical definitions of gender that emphasize a certain way of being or expectations for behaviour. Mager and Helgeson (2010), of Eastern Washington University and Gonzaga University respectively, critically examined fifty years of advertising in North America with a specific focus on the portrayals of gender, particularly those of women. Their results reveal that in media and in advertising women are more often portrayed in the home than outside of it, are depicted as dependent upon men, are cast as subordinate to men, and are often presented as victims who are in need of protection. Furthermore, their findings indicate the female body is used as a visual element within advertisements and in media, more so than the male body. Mager & Helgeson's study, therefore, demonstrates that over the course of half a century, advertisements and media have subtly, and sometimes not so subtly, maintained gender specific portrayals of behaviour.

To an uncritical eye, there is a risk in overlooking the significant social influence of media, advertising, and marketing. Though these social messages are often implicit, they still serve to reinforce standards of expectations for what it means to be female or male living in society. Although the literature explores how youth are influenced to make meaning of the societal messages of gender stereotypes and expectations, the research falls short in demonstrating how youth respond and interact with these messages.

Female Appearance

With the recent rise of social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Pinterest), there has been an increased interest in examining the connection between beauty ideals promoted in social media and young girls' perceptions of body image. There exists an abundance of research that investigates the influence of societal messages of body appearance

ideals on young girls' own body satisfaction (Ata, Ludden, & Lally, 2007; Eyal & Te'eni-Harai, 2013; Lawler & Nixon, 2011; Pomerantz et al., 2013; Romo et al., 2016; Slater et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2014). In considering Mager & Helgeson's (2010) findings that the female body is commonly used as a visual element within advertisements and in media, it is not surprising that a significant amount of literature sets out to explore how young girls are influenced by these portrayals of the female gender.

Much of the literature set out to investigate how young girls are affected or impacted by the unrealistic expectations of female appearance ideals promoted by society and social media. Several researchers have concluded that young girls' exposure to body image ideals increases their body image dissatisfaction (Ata et al., 2007; Eyal & Te'eni-Harai, 2013; Lawler & Nixon, 2011; Slater et al., 2017). These researchers maintain that body image dissatisfaction is linked to negative psychological outcomes, including anxiety, depression, reduced self-esteem, and high-risk eating behaviours (Ata et al., 2007; Eyal & Te'eni-Harai, 2013; Lawler & Nixon, 2011; Slater et al., 2017). This research serves to demonstrate that young girls are influenced by female appearance ideals promoted by society and social media.

It is important to note, however, that the language used within these research articles casts young girls as passive recipients of their environments. For example, in some articles the words "the effects of" and "the impact of" are contained within the title itself (see, for example, Ata et al., 2007; Lawler & Nixon, 2011; Slater et al., 2017). Each of these three studies uses the language of effects when it comes to discussing the influence of appearance ideals in the lives of young girls. Within this literature the focus of investigation is on how young girls are vulnerable to oppressive narratives that promote how they are expected to be, act, and look. There is little

focus on how young girls respond in ways to protect their dignity, or how they oppose the body appearance ideals.

Some researchers suggest parents and educators must strive to limit young girls' exposure to these messages, in order to minimize the risk of negative psychological outcomes for them (Slater et al., 2017). Unfortunately, bearing in mind the literature that demonstrates social messages of gender stereotypes are highly prevalent both implicitly and explicitly in media and in society (Auster & Mansbach, 2012; Freeman, 2007; Mager & Helgeson, 2010), limiting exposure to these messages would be a challenging feat. Rather than focusing on how to limit young girls' exposure, the attention must instead be cast on exploring the agency these girls carry, in order to elucidate how they can resist these narratives.

Williams, Schimel, Hayes, and Usta's (2014) study conducted at Grand Valley State University explores how young girls respond to female appearance ideals and gender expectations. Their study demonstrates young girls resist against body image ideals by acting against the status quo, in order to emphasize their own uniqueness and personal value. Although William et al.'s study recognizes the agency young girls possess, throughout the article the language of effects pervades, thereby also suggesting young girls are affected by these messages. The messages promoted within the article suggest the language of effects remains entrenched within the discourses used to discuss the experiences of youth, despite efforts to bring awareness to the agency youth possess.

Other researchers also attempt to bring awareness and recognition to young girls' agency. For instance, the University of California's Romo, Mireles-Rios, and Hurtado (2016) demonstrate that young girls respond in many ways to the messages they receive from people in their lives about female beauty and body ideals. The researchers establish that the way young

girls respond depends on the context of how the message is offered (Romo et al., 2016).

Researchers at Ontario's Brock University—Pomerantz, Raby, and Stefanik (2013)—maintain young girls carry an awareness of gender inequalities and adapt their behaviours in an effort to be seen in certain ways. Kagesten and colleagues' (2016) research, led by John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, suggests young girls do in fact challenge and oppose gender inequalities.

These studies demonstrate young girls intentionally act in ways to resist gender inequalities. Although these studies acknowledge young girls are active responders, the studies do not go as far as to demonstrate how the girls' responses can be considered strategic acts of resistance that represent strength, intelligence, creativity, determination, and resourcefulness (Hauge et al., 2002; Richardson & Bonnah, 2015; Wade 1997).

Youth Agency

Within the literature that explores youth as active responders, the topic of youth responding with agency in situations of violence in the home is at the forefront (Katz, 2015; Överlien & Hyden, 2009; Richardson & Bonnah 2015). Common within this set of literature is the exploration of how youth view and conceptualize violence and injustices, as well as how they take action in situations of violence perpetrated against them or another person in the home (Hauge et al., 2002; Katz 2015; Överlien & Hyden, 2009; Vogel, 2017). Throughout this domain of literature, there is an underlying strengths-based theme of challenging the notion of children as passive recipients of their environments.

Research that examines youth agency in the context of violence is an emerging field of inquiry. Many researchers in this field have recognized that all too often, both in research and in practice, children's responses to violence as well as the contextual elements of their experiences

of violence in the home are largely overlooked (Hauge et al., 2002; Katz, 2015; Överlien & Hyden, 2009; Richardson & Bonnah, 2015; Vogel, 2017). Such researchers assert it is often the case that children's responses (e.g., sadness, despair, longing, hope, acting out, anger) to violence in the home are depicted as 'symptoms of' or 'effects of' decontextualized events (Hauge et al., 2002; Katz, 2015; Richardson & Bonnah, 2015). In this way, the inherent strength children possess, as demonstrated through their responses to unjust circumstances such as violence, is often overlooked.

Rather than focusing on how youth are affected or impacted by witnessing violence within the home, several researchers have shifted the focus of investigation to how youth make sense of their experience, and how they respond to protect themselves as well as others. The 2009 study by Överlien (of the Norwegian Centre for Violence and Traumatic Stress Studies) and Hyden (of Linköping University) assessed the ways children respond to their fathers' acts of violence perpetrated against their mothers. These researchers' findings suggest children always do something in response to violence, whether it is observable or not.

Hauge, Mullender, Kelly, Imam, and Malos (2002), of the University of Warwick, explored how youth make meaning of violence within the home as well as the coping strategies the youth implement. Similar to Överlien and Hyden's findings, Hauge et al.'s findings demonstrate youth come up with creative, intelligible, and strategic methods of responding to violence, whether directly or indirectly, in order to maximize their safety and their ability to cope. For example, some children in their study sought help from trusted adults, while others stayed close to their siblings and provided them with reassurance (Hauge et al., 2002). Other children used creative ways of coping, like finding a safe haven or a quiet place, in order to calm themselves and gather up their resources to come up with a plan (Hauge et al., 2002). Some of

these strategic acts were overt, but most were covert and were often overlooked by many of the adults in the children's lives (Hauge et al., 2002). Although these strategies might have been considered small acts, they demonstrate youth take an active role in coping with and seeking out solutions when faced with situations of violence and adversity.

In a slightly different context, a researcher from the Department of Social Work at Stockholm University set out to examine how young girls conceptualize their experiences of being adolescent females while navigating social services for "troubled adolescents" (Vogel, 2017, p. 72). Vogel's study suggests young girls carry an awareness of the negative perceptions that service providers hold about them and that tend to deny them agency. In response, these girls actively attempted to position themselves as agents in their lives by refusing to assume the role of victim, and instead asserting their autonomy to accentuate their capabilities. This research offers insight into how young girls carry an awareness of the discursive operations used to disadvantage them, as well insight into how they respond in an effort to uphold their dignity.

In this collection of literature, many of the researchers emphasize the importance of examining the contextual and relational frames of young people's stories, in order to understand how they respond to oppose unjust circumstances (Hauge et al., 2002; Överlien & Hyden, 2009; Vogel, 2017). Some advocate that focusing on children's actions during a violent event could serve to expand practitioners' views of children as agents in their lives, and also illuminate how children respond in opposition to violence rather than addressing how they might be acted upon (Överlien & Hyden, 2009). Others bring attention to recognizing the voices of young people, who have often been silenced by social institutions that neglect to see the insightfulness and agency they carry (Hauge et al., 2002). Still others argue professionals must look beyond definitions of pathology, in order to recognize the individual strength, capability, and

resourcefulness young girls possess (Vogel, 2017). Taken together, the research in this field provides support to suggest youth have capacity to act as active responders, but the research is limited to exploring how youth respond in the context of violence or unjust circumstances and does not extend to explore how they respond to societal discourses of gender stereotypes and expectations.

Literature Review Discussion

Within the literature that examines the influences of societal messages of gendering in the lives of youth, the language of effects is pervasive. While there exists a body of literature that attempts to acknowledge and honour the agency youth carry when responding to gender expectations, the same literature also serves to convey contradictory messages through its explanation of youths' responses: that is, as effects of a cause. This language of effects serves to position youth as passive recipients of their environments and tends to deny the youth of their agency (Richardson & Bonnah, 2015). A gap in the literature can then be bridged by applying a response-based practice lens to explore the ways female identifying youth respond to societal messages of female gender stereotypes in society.

Chapter Three: Methodology

The methodology used in this study will be explained in this chapter. I will offer a summary of the research design, including the rationale for the approach and how it connects to the research question of this study. I will describe the participant population selected for this study, followed by the data collection procedures, and the thematic analysis process. I will then outline the ethical and legal considerations and the role of the researcher.

Research Design

Traditionally, quantitative research has been the dominant mode of inquiry (Creswell, 2014). Quantitative research holds a deterministic philosophy in which it sets out to examine the causes of an effect (Creswell, 2014). It also holds a reductionist perspective that aims to reduce complex phenomena into small and discrete entities for testing (Creswell, 2014). Although quantitative approaches work well for examining relationships between variables, they typically do not extend well to seeking insight into complex phenomena of human experience. For this reason, social science researchers have established qualitative research methods that provide rich descriptions of human social phenomena (Creswell, 2014). Through qualitative research methods, researchers can gather insight into the meanings persons ascribe to particular social situations (Creswell, 2014).

As the aim of this study is to provide insight into a particular group of young girls in their social context, a qualitative case study design was selected. According to Creswell (2014), a case study allows a researcher to generate an in-depth account of data, which are collected directly from one or more participants. Such a design relies heavily on participant views, so it offers the researcher an opportunity to establish insight into the meanings participants ascribe to a certain phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). The present study is premised on the idea of honouring and

acknowledging the agency adolescent girls carry; therefore a case study design was selected to facilitate an opportunity for them to share how they respond to social messages in their environment. Furthermore, this case study design is intended to allow for the generation of deeper insight and understanding into how these girls make meaning of the social messages.

Two forms of analyses were considered for this study: critical discourse analysis and thematic analysis. A critical discourse analysis (CDA) design allows researchers to assess the role of power in society and how language operates to set limits on how people act, think, or communicate (Shaw & Bailey, 2009). A CDA approach is used to identify patterns within the nuances of language or the fine-grained functionality of discourse (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Shaw & Bailey, 2009). A CDA would be fitting if the present study aimed to investigate the prevalence or the detailed mechanics of the language of effects *versus* the language of responses in the discourses used by young people to describe their experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Shaw & Bailey, 2009). As the scope of this present study is to identify the patterns and themes within the responses of the participants, a critical discourse analysis approach was not selected.

Instead, a thematic analysis design was selected, as it offers the researcher flexibility to produce a rich, in-depth account of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The tenets of a thematic analysis design support a view that the researcher assumes an active rather than passive role in conducting the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), if the researcher describes themes as ‘emerging’ or as ‘discovered’ in the data, this view encourages readers to interpret that the themes ‘reside’ within data, as opposed to the idea that the researcher assumes an active role in identifying and making meaning of the themes. This underlying value of acknowledging the agency the researcher exerts in conducting the analysis aligns with the philosophy of this study, which is to elucidate the agency people carry.

A thematic analysis with a constructionist epistemology was used (Braun & Clark, 2006), to analyze the themes at the latent level of female identifying youths' responses to an open-ended questionnaire that explored how they respond to the social messages of female gender stereotypes operating within society. In this way the research question: *How does the application of a response-based practice theory to the responses of female identifying youth inform the professionals who support them?* was examined. A response-based practice lens informed the theoretical position of the researcher. The questionnaire used in the study consisted of three questions, and each question incorporated the language of responses (see Appendix A). The assumption was that in using the language of responses, the participants were offered an opportunity to share how they respond to social messages of female gender stereotypes. By applying a response-based practice lens to the thematic analysis, the aim was to invite insight into the ways the participants respond.

Participants

The participants chosen for this study included only girls aged 12 to 13 years, enrolled in an in-school *Go Girls* program I co-facilitated at the not-for-profit organization known as Big Brothers Big Sisters, in Victoria, Canada (Big Brothers Big Sisters, 2019). *Go Girls* is a ten-week, group-mentoring program for female identifying youth that is structured around the themes of physical activity, balanced eating, self-esteem, and communication skills (Big Brothers Big Sisters, 2019). The 'What it is like to be a girl' activity is one I had used in previous groups prior to conducting the study, and the questionnaire was designed to align with the *Go Girls* curriculum. A specific *Go Girls* group was then selected, in order to gather several participant responses at one time.

A total of seven girls participated in the activity. However, only four of the seven provided parental consent to participate, so the questionnaires of the three girls who did not were not used in this study. The inclusion criteria excluded male identifying youth, children younger than 12 or older than 13, and youth not enrolled in the *Go Girls* program.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were gathered through an open-ended questionnaire that was distributed during a 20-minute group activity with participants (see Appendix B for a detailed outline of the group activity). The study was conducted during a *Go Girls* session. The style of an open-ended questionnaire was chosen in order to enable participants to share freely their voices and perspectives, as well as to offer data that represent the language of the participants. Furthermore, a questionnaire format provided a handwritten sample of participant responses, which meant the researcher depended on written statements from participants, as opposed to verbal statements that could increase the likelihood of researcher bias or misrepresentation of data during the transcription phase (Creswell, 2014).

The questionnaire consisted of three questions. The first question invited participants to provide examples of the social messages they receive about what it is like to be a girl living in their society. Social messages were defined as those they heard from people in their lives or perceived from the society around them (i.e., social media, television, music, books) about how girls are supposed to be, act, think, or feel. A total of 32 data extracts were generated by question one.

Question two invited participants to provide at least one example of social messages they had experienced, and question three invited them to provide an example of how they responded

(i.e., act, thought, felt) to the particular message they identified in question two. For questions two and three, 15 data extracts were generated each, for a total of 30 data extracts.

Data Analysis

The thematic analysis was conducted in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework. Braun and Clarke encourage researchers to be transparent about the decision-making process in the selection and identification of themes. Therefore, throughout the data analysis process, I kept a personal journal, in order to track my decisions and rationale. Before beginning the thematic analysis, the raw data obtained from the participant questionnaires were transcribed into Microsoft Word and printed. I separated the analysis into two parts corresponding to the three questions in the questionnaire. As the first question provided insight into social messages the participants receive from society, it was analyzed separately from the other two questions. The second and third questions were then analyzed together, as question two was designed to provide context for question three. Finally, because the third question directly addresses the research question, the thematic analysis specifically focused on the data from the third question. Question one was also analyzed for themes in order to offer context about the social messages to which participants were responding in question three.

The first phase of the thematic analysis involved the researcher becoming familiar with the data, in order to begin the process of identifying initial patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thus I scanned through the entirety of the data to begin identifying initial patterns. During my second read, I made notes in the margins of the questionnaires to get a sense of recurring ideas, notions, or terms. For question one, the initial patterns I noted about the social messages the participants reported included *strength, beauty, appearance, demeanour, behaviour, subordination, physique, restriction, positive, embrace, gender difference, education, and career.*

For question three, the initial patterns I noted about the ways the participants responded to social messages included *embracing, challenging, reasoning, intention, action, agency, acknowledging her position, awareness of injustice and expectations, and questioning the assumptions underlying the message.*

In phase two of the thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest organizing data into meaningful groups based on patterns, in order to generate codes. Using Microsoft Word, I manually separated the raw data into two tables, in order to provide clear lists of all the raw data pertaining to each question. The data collected from question one were included in one table, while the data for questions two and three were included side by side in another table. I began the process of manually coding the data by using the initial patterns I extrapolated from phase one and matching those patterns to the data extracts. For the data from question one, I identified 13 codes. During the coding process I noticed for some data extracts there were multiple codes, which Braun and Clarke mention is likely to occur during this process. I then took a similar approach to organizing the data from question three, and identified nine codes.

The task of the third phase of the thematic analysis involves re-focusing the analysis to the level of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I revisited both the research question and the literature, in order to provide a framework for my process of identifying themes. Braun and Clarke suggest themes can be generated from the codes already identified in the earlier phases, or from combining, collapsing, or expanding the initial codes. In noting the similarities among the codes, I began the process of collapsing them into distinctive themes, keeping in mind the codes' characteristics. For example, from the data from question one, the codes *gender differences, career, and education* all appeared to depict the female gender as subordinate to the male gender, and thus these codes were redefined as *subordination*. I examined the initial 13 codes I identified

from question one and generated the following initial themes: *subordination*, *strength*, *beauty*, *body appearance*, and *behaviour*.

In reviewing my initial themes, I also observed patterns within the language used by participants to identify the social messages they receive. While the focus of this thematic analysis was to identify themes at the latent level (Braun & Clark, 2006), in this particular data set the semantic content was relevant to the research question. The terms *need*, *not*, and *be* were recurring words in the semantic content of the data. These words were also related to two of the initial codes I noted: *restriction* and *embrace*. Therefore, I integrated the data extracts pertaining to the patterns of *restriction* and *embrace* into the corresponding sub-themes: *need*, *not*, and *be*.

For the data from question three, I initially identified nine codes. As I reviewed them, I noted there were multiple codes for some data extracts; thus I combined codes containing the same data extracts in order to develop distinctive themes. For example, the code referred to as *defends* appeared to overlap with the codes *refusal to accept*, *fight against*, and *stand up against*, so this code was collapsed and the corresponding data extracts were integrated into the most appropriate of the three codes: either *refusal to accept*, *fight against*, or *stand up against*.

I also developed concise wording for the codes, as some of them consisted of several words. For example, I redefined the code *recognizing injustice* within the theme *expose*, as upon deeper reflection it seemed the term *expose* better captured the act that was identified as bringing light to injustice. In addition, the code *standing up against* was redefined as *withstand*. The initial themes identified were as follows: *expose*, *withstand*, *refuse*, *repel*, *abstain*, and *no resistance*.

The fourth phase of the thematic analysis involves reviewing candidate themes and redefining the themes, in order to generate distinctive and meaningful collections of the data

(Braun & Clarke, 2006). I generated lists of my rationale for collating my data extracts into the candidate themes. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe this as a key step in developing coherent patterns. After constructing a clear and concise rationale for each candidate theme, I reviewed the data extracts that were collated into each, and rearranged the data extracts according to the most accurate themes.

In this process I observed that for the data from question three there was still some overlap among the data extracts in the candidate themes *refuse*, *withstand*, and *repel*. At this point I decided it would be necessary to define these themes, in order to provide clarification about what each theme captures. For example, data extracts that demonstrated an assertion of refusal against the social message were placed under the theme of *refuse*. Whereas indications of standing up against the message were collated under the theme of *withstand*, the extracts that demonstrated intent to fight against the message were placed under the theme of *repel*. In defining the codes in this manner, extracts were rearranged with less overlap noted. During this process I also redefined the candidate theme *no resistance* to that of *approve*, as *no resistance* insinuated there was no action within the response but upon closer examination it was evident that action was indeed inherent within the responses. For example, in each of the corresponding extracts there was an indication of approval or acknowledgement of the social message.

In phase five of the thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke (2006) outline that the process involves further defining and refining the themes, in order to clarify the distinctive features of each theme as well as how the themes reflect the data. For this process, I created three thematic maps in Microsoft Word, corresponding to the two sets of candidate themes and the one set of subthemes. In each thematic map, I included the theme, the description, and the supporting data.

Finally I reviewed the data extracts for each theme and subtheme, to ensure coherence and that the themes captured a representation of the participants' described experiences.

The final themes identified at the latent level about the types of social messages the participants received from people in their lives, as well as from the society around them, include *subordination* (i.e., the female gender is depicted as subordinate to the male gender); *strength* (i.e., females are expected to hold certain kinds of physical or emotional strength); *beauty* (i.e., certain expectations of beauty, involving particular physical features, are privileged); *body appearance* (i.e., certain body appearances are favoured); and *behaviour* (i.e., acting with well-mannered behaviour is expected). The subthemes identified from the semantic content include *need* (i.e., an obligation to fulfill a duty); *not* (i.e., restriction of behaviour); and *be* (i.e., to have an identity with something). The final themes identified at the latent level, about how participants respond to the particular social messages they have received, include: *expose* (i.e., to name and make known the injustice); *refuse* (i.e., to express oneself as unwilling to accept the message); *withstand* (i.e., to defend girlhood by standing up against injustices using determination); *repel* (i.e., to assert one's position to fight against injustices); *abstain* (i.e., to take action to do something different to protect the self and dignity); and *approve* (i.e., to indicate approval of the message).

The final stage of the thematic analysis involves producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Therefore, chapter four provides an overview of the complete results, and chapter five includes a detailed discussion about each of the themes identified, in relation both to the research question and to the literature.

Methodological Limitations

The case study design is intended to generate deeper insight into the responses of a particular group of young people, and a set of four participants is advantageous to this style of inquiry (Creswell, 2014). Nevertheless, I acknowledge there are several limitations in both the design and the scope of the present study. First, this study was conducted with a specific group of young girls that share the characteristics of attending the same school, in the same grade and having similar socio-economic status, and residing in the same geographic region. In addition, these girls are all enrolled in a mentoring program that centers on the experiences of young girls who are navigating their sociocultural worlds. Thus, as the participants in this study share similar characteristics, there some risk of selection bias (Creswell, 2014). Keeping this in mind, the insights generated from this study cannot be generalized beyond this group of participants.

Second, although for the most part the data generated from the questionnaire provide a rich account of the participants' experiences, a limitation of the questionnaire format is that some participants were not as articulate or descriptive in their answers to questions as other were, and this inconsistency provided a range in the quantity of data collected from them (Creswell, 2014). For instance, some participants reported at least five examples of the social messages they have received, and also five examples of their corresponding responses, whereas other participants provided only two to three.

Third, a known limitation of the thematic analysis design is the difficulty that arises for researchers in narrowing the wide range of data into meaningful themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This study used three open-ended questions to collect data, which provided a total of 62 data extracts. During the data analysis procedures, it was noted that several data extracts contained more than one expression of the themes of participants' responses. For example, the data extract

(“I said no, girls can do anything boys can do!”) contained expressions of the themes *repel* (i.e., “I said no”) and *withstand* (i.e., “girls can do anything boys can do!”). Thus, although only three questions were used within this study, the data extracts produced were plentiful. (Three questions were selected in order to produce an ample yet a reasonable set of data).

Fourth, according to Braun and Clarke (2006), another criticism of a thematic analysis design involves the potential loss of context of participants’ accounts. During the coding procedures in the present study, it was noted that within some data extracts the context within which the account was portrayed was limited. For some data extracts, there was a multitude of different ways the data extract could have been interpreted. For instance, the statement “you are beautiful,” could have been interpreted as describing the physical attributes of the participant (e.g., stature, appearance), or it could have been interpreted as describing her emotional qualities (e.g., expressions of empathy, compassion, kindness). Even though open-ended questions were created to elicit as much context as possible (e.g., participants were asked to identify the social message to which they were responding), and efforts were made to minimize the risk of de-contextualizing accounts, there were a few data extracts that remained undeniably open to interpretation.

Ethical and Legal Considerations

There were several ethical and legal considerations for this study. As this research study involved human participants, City University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was required (see Appendix C). In addition, this study also required approval from the local Big Brothers Big Sisters organization and the local school board. Both the organization and the school board were provided detailed information about the purpose and intent of the study.

In the initial session of *Go Girls*, the youth were provided recruitment letters and parental consent packages to take home to their parents. The girls and their parents were given detailed information about the study that included information about the researcher, the purpose of the study, rationale for the study, risks and benefits, and information about privacy. This information was provided to parents and participants prior to the study with the intent of offering transparency about the research process.

The *Go Girls* group consisted of 13 youth. On the day of the study, only seven youth were present for the session, of the seven, four had parental consent and three did not. All members present on the day of the study were permitted to engage in the activity component of the study, which meant I remained mindful of which participants did not provide consent, and at the end of the study I destroyed those members' questionnaires.

As this study uses a qualitative design investigating the lived experiences of participants, any reference to identifiable persons was kept anonymous (Creswell, 2014). The raw data are kept secure on the researcher's personal computer within a password-encrypted file, and the handwritten questionnaires will be locked in a cabinet for five years and then destroyed (Creswell, 2014). I did not utilize an external coder for this research, and thus I am the only person to have had access to the raw data. Two persons other than me—a faculty member of City University of Seattle and a peer—have reviewed the identified themes and the rationale provided.

Researcher's Role

In qualitative research it is essential that researchers reflect on their personal biases, values, and assumptions (Creswell, 2014). I acknowledge that striving to be objective in this form of research is an enormous feat, as the researcher's background informs her interpretations (Creswell, 2014). Therefore, I believe it is necessary to acknowledge my own worldview. I am

passionate about working with youth and advocating for their rights. Although I recognize my experiences in mentoring and counselling young girls have offered me an array of knowledge, insight, awareness, and sensitivity into their worlds, I acknowledge my experiences might also contribute to biases for viewing young people in a particular way. In an effort to minimize the risk of bias, I have engaged in continued reflection of my worldview throughout the research process. I have also sought feedback and consultation from my thesis advisor in order to reduce the possibility of my personal biases clouding the research.

I also note that my influence as a co-facilitator of the *Go Girls* group provided me with a platform to establish a relationship with the youth of this study prior to the data collection procedures. Therefore, it can be argued that my role as a co-facilitator influenced the credibility I held with these youth, which invited a level of trust that might have been different if I were a stranger to them. Thus, the findings of this study must be interpreted with the awareness that I carried a dual role, as both the co-facilitator and the researcher of this group of young people.

Chapter Four: Results

In this chapter, I will provide a detailed overview of the findings of the thematic analysis. The results will be explored in two parts with each theme and subtheme described in detail. For each theme and subtheme presented, I will include a description of my rationale for identifying the theme and also include supporting quotes from the participants. In part one, I will present the five themes and three subthemes identified from the analysis that examined the social messages participants receive from society. The five themes include *subordination*, *strength*, *beauty*, *body appearance*, and *behaviour*. The three subthemes include *need*, *not*, and *be*. In part two, I will present a summary of each of the six main themes identified that examine how the participants respond to the social message they receive. The six main themes include *expose*, *refuse*, *withstand*, *repel*, *abstain*, and *approve*. These six themes will be explored in relation to the research question: *How does the application of response-based practice theory to the responses of female identifying youth inform professionals who support them?*

Part One: Themes of the Social Messages

As the aim of this study is to examine how young girls respond to the social messages of female gender stereotypes, it was necessary first to examine the characteristics of the social messages to which the girls are responding, in order to provide context for their responses. Thus, the first part of the thematic analysis explored the examples of social messages the participants receive from the people in their lives as well as from social media, television, music, and books, about how girls are supposed to act, think, or feel. From the thematic analysis, five themes (i.e., *subordination*, *strength*, *beauty*, *body appearance*, and *behaviour*) and three subthemes (i.e., *need*, *not*, and *be*) were identified that capture the types of social messages the participants receive (see Figure 1 and Figure 2).

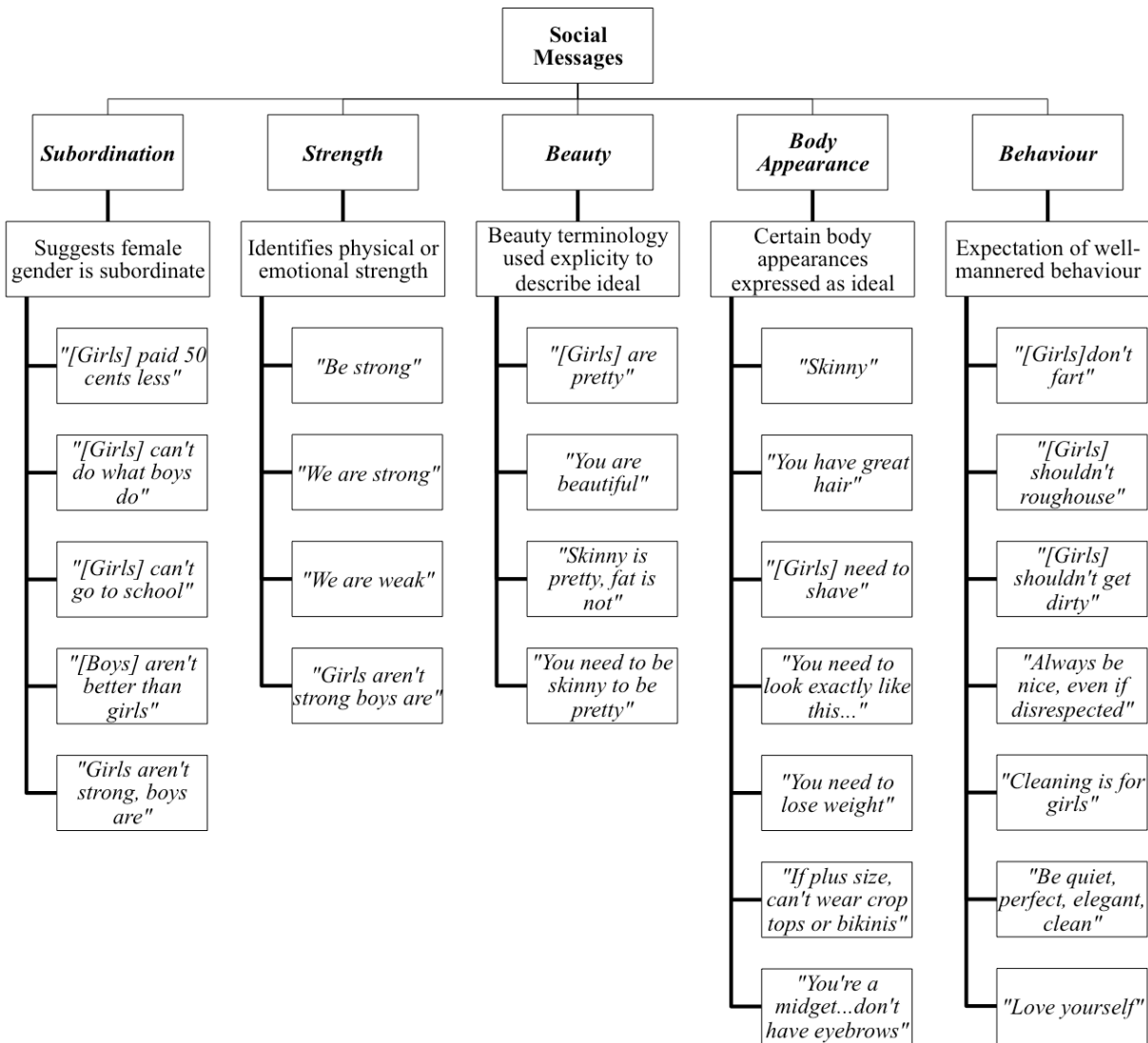


Figure 1. Latent themes of social messages of female gender stereotypes.

Subordination. There was a noticeable trend in the data that explicitly compared the female gender to the male gender. For example, the social messages included “[Girls] get paid 50 cents less,” “[Girls] can’t do what boys do,” “[Girls] can’t go to school,” and “Girls aren’t strong, boys are.” These social messages make reference to the gender pay gap, female education, and differences in ability, with each statement positioning the female gender as subordinate to the male gender. Of all the data extracts that explicitly compared the female gender to the male gender, only one appeared to cast the female gender in a positive light, namely, “[Boys] aren’t

better than girls.” Of interest, though, is the manner in which this statement was phrased. The message seems to be advocating for the female gender, yet at the same time inherent within the statement is a direct challenge against an underlying assumption that ‘boys *are* better than girls.’ Although the message alludes to females *being better* than males, the semantics of the message depict females as inferior to males by positioning *girls* as the object within the statement. The theme identified as *subordination* illustrates the social messages that depict the female gender as subordinate to the male gender.

Strength. Within the data, there were references to both physical and emotional strength as qualities of the female gender. Moreover, the social messages of strength were two-fold in another way as well. On one hand, the social messages describe females as weak or not as physically or emotionally strong as their male counterparts; but on the other hand, the messages encourage females to be strong and embrace their strength. Although the messages consisted of what might be considered positive and negative perceptions of strength, it is interesting to note that the positive messages seem to contradict the negative ones. For example, the messages “Be strong” and “We are strong” contradict the messages “[Girls] are weak” and “Girls aren’t strong, boys are.” Therefore, the theme of *strength* captures the social messages that convey expectations of physical or emotional strength females are expected to hold.

Beauty. Another prevalent trend within the data involved the use of beauty terminology. The words *pretty* and *beautiful* were used within several social messages to illustrate certain privileged beauty ideals. For example, the participants indicated they received messages such as “Girls are pretty” or “You are beautiful.” The social messages also involved associations between beauty ideals and thin body size. The participants reported messages including “Skinny is pretty, fat is not” and “You need to be skinny to be pretty.” Not only do these messages

convey that certain physical qualities are more admirable or desirable than others, but they also suggest beauty is equated with certain physical features. Hence, the theme of *beauty* refers to the social messages that privilege certain expectations of feminine attractiveness.

Body Appearance. Similar to the theme of *beauty*, the theme of *body appearance* illustrates the messages that convey certain expectations of body appearance ideals, with a specific focus on physical appearance. This theme captures the messages that are suggestive of certain ideal body sizes. For example, the social messages the participants received included “[Be] skinny,” “You’re a midget, you don’t have eyebrows” and “You need to lose weight.” Again, similar to the theme of *beauty*, the underlying connotation conveyed within these social messages is that there are certain body appearance traits that are more admirable than others: for example, those of thinness and tall stature.

Another message stated, “If you are plus size, you can’t wear crop tops or bikinis.” Inherent within this message is the expectation that female youth must look a certain way in order to engage in certain dressing behaviours. One participant even identified the social message “You need to look exactly like this,” suggesting that appearance standards are highly prevalent.

Of the data pertaining to body appearance, only one message seemed to insinuate a positive message. This positive message, namely, “You have great hair,” was provided in the form of praise about a certain physical feature, which again conveys the idea that certain characteristics of body appearance are more desirable or admirable than others. The theme of *body appearance*, therefore, refers to the social messages that depict specific ideals of physical appearance for females.

Behaviour. Throughout the data set, there were several mentions of the expectations of how young girls are to act or behave, which was an expected finding given that the participants were encouraged to identify the social messages they receive about how they are to act, think, or feel. The majority of the messages the participants identified involved some indication of an expectation of well-mannered behaviour. Examples include “[Girls] don’t fart,” “[Girls] shouldn’t roughhouse,” “[Girls] shouldn’t get dirty,” “Always be nice, even if you are disrespected,” and “Be quiet, perfect, elegant, and clean.” Not only do these messages promote well-mannered and polite behaviours, but they also imply that females are expected to refrain from certain behaviours or actions. Within these messages there is an implicit comparison to the male gender suggesting that these expectations might not apply to their male counterparts: that is, farting, roughhousing, and getting dirty would be more socially acceptable for males as opposed to females. The theme of *behaviour*, therefore, refers to the social messages that promote an expectation of how females are to act with gender-appropriate manners.

Summary of latent themes of social messages. The latent themes generated from the social messages the girls described receiving about how they must act, think, or feel offered a range of insight into the stereotypical expectations they experiences. Many of the social messages contained implicit as well as explicit comparisons to the male gender, with the female gender positioned as subordinate. Out of the 32 messages collected, only five reflected positive or encouraging statements (i.e., “be strong,” “you are strong,” “you are beautiful,” “you have great hair,” and “love yourself”). The paucity of positive statements is an interesting finding and is suggestive that young girls navigate within a climate of discouraging as well as restrictive beauty, behaviour, and body appearance ideals. Thus, the latent themes identified as

subordination, strength, beauty, body appearance, and behaviour provide context concerning the social messages the participants are developing in, and to which they are also responding.

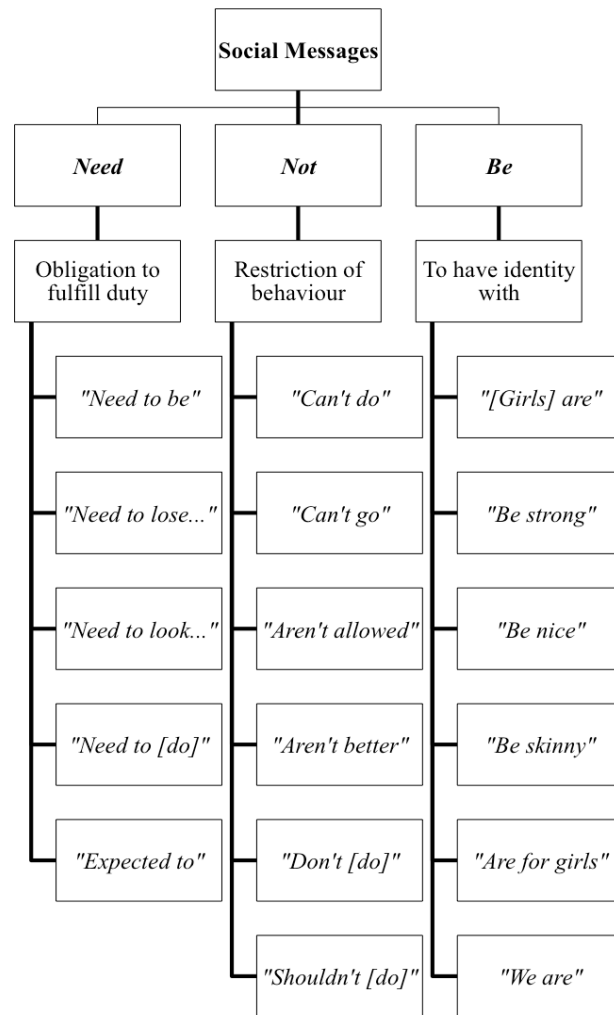


Figure 2. Semantic subthemes of social messages of female gender stereotypes.

Need. Throughout the data set, several of the social messages identified by participants expressed an obligation on the part of females to fulfill certain duties, looks, or roles. For example, within some of the social messages the word *need* conveyed that young girls carry a responsibility to look a certain way (i.e., “need to be skinny,” “need to shave,” and “need to look

exactly like this...”). Furthermore, with reference to body appearance, one participant received the message, “You need to lose weight.” Inherent in this message is the idea that one must commit to a certain action (i.e., losing weight), in order to fit into a particular standard of appearance. Other statements included the messages “[Girls] need to be,” “[Girls] need to do,” or “[Girls] are expected to.” Each of these statements further suggests that there exists a notion that young girls must be restricted to particular ways of being. Hence, the subtheme of *need* refers to obligations for females to fulfill certain prescribed duties, looks, or roles.

Not. Another notable trend involved reference to the things young girls are *not* able to do. Contractions of the word *not* were also used within several statements to identify a restriction or limitation to the behaviours young girls can engage in. Within all but one of the data extracts that explicitly compared the female gender to the male gender, the word *not* was used to infer a constraint on the behaviours females could engage in. Examples include “Girls can’t do the stuff that boys do,” “You can’t go to school because you are a girl,” “Girls aren’t allowed to go to school,” and “Girls aren’t strong, and boys are.” Other variations of the word *not* included girls “can’t do,” “shouldn’t do,” and “don’t do.” All of these statements suggest the social messages young girls receive assert limitations on the range of activities and aspirations they can have. Thus, the subtheme of *not* refers to the social messages that convey a notion that females are not able to engage in certain acts.

Be. Within the data, there were several references to the word *be*, as well as to its present tense plural form *are*. The use of the words *be* and *are* was an expected finding, as participants were asked to identify the social messages they receive concerning how they *are* to act, think, or feel. Thus, it was expected that there would be messages that would express a sense of identity with the message. For example, the word *be* was used to describe a way of appearing, existing,

or acting for females (i.e., “be skinny,” “be strong,” and “be nice”). The term *are* was used both to describe a quality or characteristic of being female (i.e., “are beautiful,” “are pretty,” “are perfect,” and “are strong”). It was also used with the term *not* to indicate incompatible qualities or characteristics of the female gender (i.e., “aren’t allowed,” “aren’t strong,” and “aren’t better”). The subtheme of *be*, therefore, refers to the social messages that suggest females have an identity with certain qualities and characteristics of female gender stereotypes.

Summary of semantic subthemes of social messages. The semantic subthemes identified within the social messages offer insight into the kinds of messages the girls described receiving. The messages not only denote certain qualities and characteristics of how to be, they also convey certain restrictions or limitations to behaviours as well as specific obligations female identifying youth are to fulfill. Understanding the assumptions inherent within the social messages young girls receive is relevant to unpacking how they respond to these messages.

Part Two: Themes of the Responses to Social Messages

The themes and subthemes identified in part one provided a contextual frame of reference for part two of the study. The intent of part two was to examine how the application of response-based practice theory to the responses of female identifying youth informs professionals who support them. The social messages the participants of this study experienced, as reported in part one, include those of *subordination*, *strength*, *beauty*, *body appearance*, and *behaviour*. The findings described in part one suggest these messages promote certain standards or expectations, as well as encourage restrictions or limitations to how girls are to act, think, and feel. Thus, in part two of the analysis, the ways in which the girls responded to the social messages they received will be explored. The six main themes identified are *expose*, *refuse*, *withstand*, *repel*, *abstain*, and *approve* (see Figure 3).

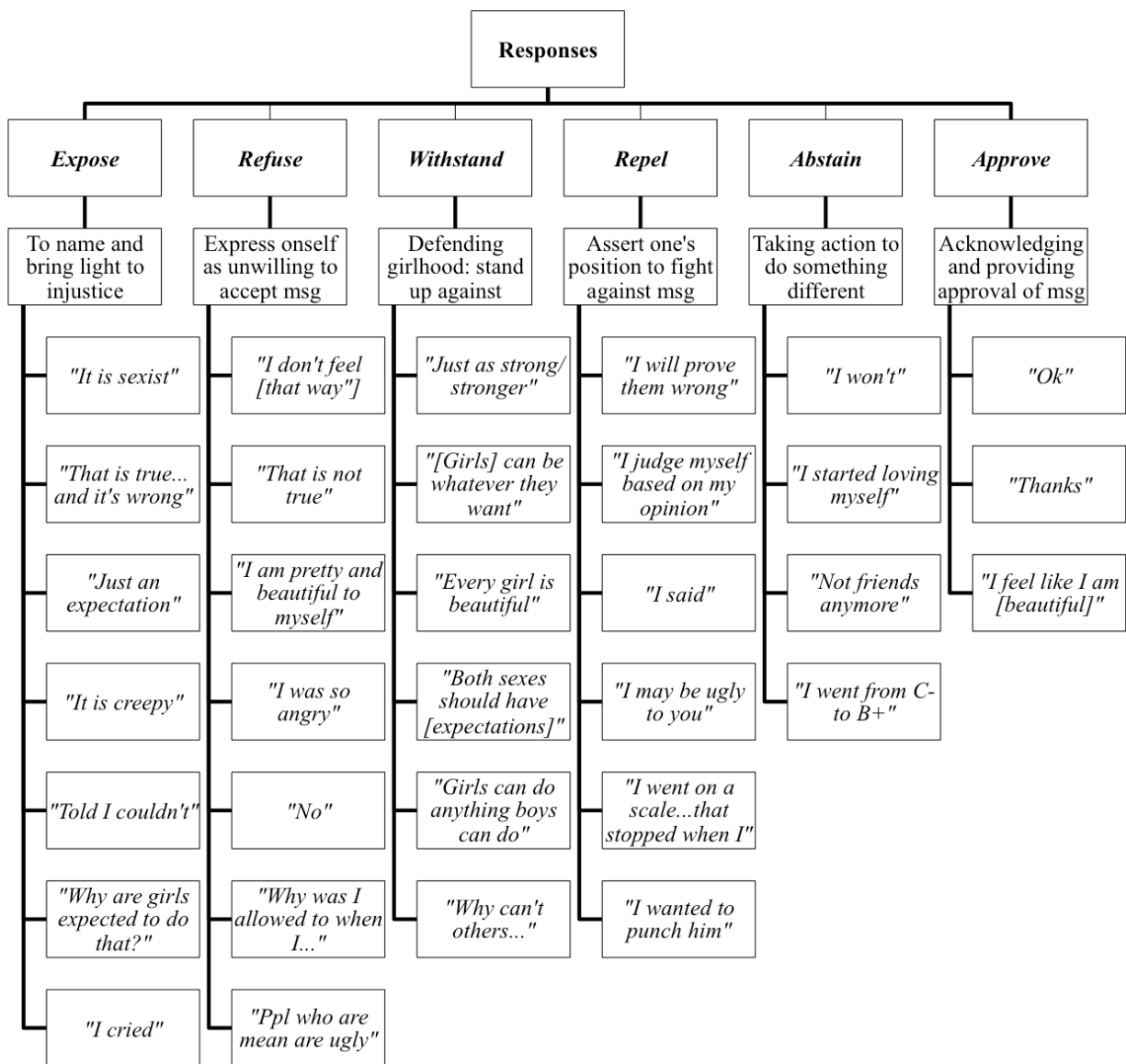


Figure 3. Themes within participants’ responses to social messages of female gender stereotypes.

Expose. Within the data set, the participants’ efforts to highlight gender differences and bring to light the injustices within the social messages they receive were highly prevalent. The participants named the injustices for what they perceived they were: for example, “sexist,” “wrong,” or “just an expectation,” as well as identified when the message was hurtful (e.g., “I cried”). In response to the social message, “clean the house from top to bottom, 24/7,” a participant questioned, “Why are girls expected to clean up?” This youth brought to light the

inequity embedded within the message, which associated cleaning and housework as expected roles of females. Another participant stated, “A boy once told me I couldn’t like [a certain genre of movies] because I’m a girl.” This youth responded to this message by stating, “When I was told I couldn’t...” and she followed this with her response of *refusal* against the message. In her response, “When I was told I couldn’t,” this youth acknowledged that she recognized that embedded within the social message was a restriction of behaviour (i.e., “couldn’t like [something]...because [she is] a girl”).

Within each extract, the participants openly acknowledged, brought to light, or exposed the injustices and inequalities within the social messages they receive, suggesting they possess awareness about injustice. Thus, the theme of *expose* describes the participants’ responses of naming and making known the injustices within the social messages they receive.

Refuse. Throughout the data, there was a pattern of participant responses that expressed an unwillingness to accept social messages that contained elements of injustice. For example, one participant said, “Someone told me that I was ugly.” In response, she said, “I am pretty and beautiful to myself.” Her assertion of acknowledging that she is pretty and beautiful to herself demonstrates her resistance against accepting the message that attempted to influence her into thinking she “[is] ugly.” In another message, a participant was told, “You can’t do something because you are a girl,” and this youth responded with, “I said, actually no,” which demonstrates her refusal against accepting the message. This participant used a first-person narrative to position herself as an actively responding agent. Other participants also used the first-person narrative to denote their feelings (e.g., “I don’t feel that way” and “I was so angry”), in order to convey their unwillingness to accept a particular social message.

Some of the messages the participants were refusing involved beauty and body appearance. For example, one participant received the message, “Skinny is pretty, fat is not.” In response, she stated that she thought, “The people who are ugly are people who are mean.” This participant seemed to be responding to the injustice that sees ‘skinny’ as a privileged ideal. Though the participant’s response is in the form of a covert thought, it is nonetheless a thought that demonstrates she was actively resisting against the message by challenging the concept of beauty and extending it beyond physical traits (i.e., body size, body appearance) to ways of being (e.g., suggesting the act of shaming does not equate to beauty). Another message read, “No crop tops or bikinis if you are a plus size girl.” This participant responded with “Why was I allowed to when I wasn’t plus size?” This assertion of challenging the injustice within the social message suggests the youth was unwilling to accept the underlying assumption of the message that attempted to restrict her dressing behaviours.

Overall, it is clear the participants were aware of injustices within the social messages they received, and that they took action to resist them by demonstrating their unwillingness to accept them. The theme of *refuse*, therefore, represents the ways in which the participants responded to express themselves as unwilling to accept the social messages they perceived as unjust.

Withstand. Within the data there was evidence of defending girlhood and the collective female gender. For example, in response to the social message that “Boys are [physically] stronger” than girls, the participant responded with the statement, “A lot of girls AND women are just as strong, and stronger than men.” This proclamation suggests the participant was standing up with determination against the social message that served to cast females as subordinate to males.

Furthermore, the participants defended girlhood with responses that declared, “Girls can do anything boys can do,” as well as “[Girls] can be whatever they want to be.” To social messages that convey privileged beauty standards—for example, “Skinny is pretty, fat is not”—a participant responded with “Every girl is so beautiful,” which demonstrates a defense against the standard that inherently implies only particular physical qualities are acceptable or equated with beauty.

Other responses involved participants questioning the underlying assumptions of the messages, while also defending girlhood. For example, in response to a social message depicting that females must act in well-mannered ways, the participant responded with “Both sexes should have [expectations] or no one should!” This response suggests the participant was asserting her position to defend girlhood by resisting the expectation that was unfairly directed towards females. Thus, the theme of *withstand* refers to the participants’ responses that involve defending girlhood by standing up against social messages with determination.

Repel. Another prevalent pattern within the data involved the participants’ use of active constructions of the self to assert their position to fight or oppose social messages that appeared to contain injustices. For example, the participants positioned themselves as active responders by stating, “I said,” “I will prove them wrong,” and “I judge myself on my own opinion.” In each of these responses, the participants asserted their position to oppose the social message.

In response to the social message, “Someone told me that I was ugly,” one participant responded with “I may be ugly to you,” as a rebuttal to the message. The participant followed this rebuttal with her *refusal* statement, “I am pretty and beautiful to myself.” Another participant stated she was asked, “Are you pregnant? If you aren’t [you’re] fat,” and in response, she stated, “I went on a scale [every day] for a month hoping to even lose 1 pound a day that stopped when

I...” This participant depicted herself as an actively responding agent with her use of the first person, and she described the ways in which she fought to oppose the message by ‘going on a scale,’ ‘hoping to lose weight,’ and ‘stopping the behaviour,’ suggesting she was not acted upon by the message and in fact made an effort to oppose the hurtful connotations within the message by engaging in certain actions to preserve her dignity. The theme of *repel*, therefore, refers to the ways the participants asserted their position to fight against social messages they perceived as unjust.

Abstain. In the ways the participants responded to social messages, there was evidence to suggest they take action to do something different in order to protect their sense of self. For example, going back to the participant who received the social message, “Are you pregnant? If you aren’t [you’re] fat,” the youth responded with, “I went on a scale [every day] for a month hoping to even lose 1 pound a day that stopped when I started loving myself.” This participant asserted that she stopped weighing herself and hoping to lose weight when she embraced her qualities and chose to love herself. In this way, this youth actively chose to change the ways in which she made meaning of herself, in order to protect her dignity. In another example, a participant received the message, “You are so stupid,” and in response she declared she “went from [a] C- to B+ student in math,” signifying she took measures to improve her grades, which implies her effort to minimize the potential of receiving negative social messages that serve to attack her sense of her intelligence.

A participant shared that a friend made hurtful remarks about her physical appearance, including both body size and facial features. In response, the participant said, she ended the relationship with this person, suggesting the participant took action to remove herself from the relationship with the intention of minimizing the potential of receiving further disrespectful

remarks. Thus, the theme of *abstain* describes the ways in which the participants responded to take action to do something different, in order to protect their dignity and sense of self.

Approve. Throughout the data set, it was clear that the majority of the social messages the participants reported held connotations of injustice and inequality, to which the participants responded with resistance against the messages. There were only three instances where it appeared the social messages the participants reported were received favourably. For example, two participants indicated receiving the social message “You are beautiful,” and another stated she received the message “We are strong girls.” The participants’ responses included the following: “I feel like I am [beautiful],” “Thanks I feel beautiful,” and “Ok [I feel strong].” It is interesting to note that in each of the responses the participants used the word *feel* to describe their experience with the messages of beauty and strength, as opposed to an assertion of *I am* that would suggest identity with beauty and strength. Nevertheless, within each response there is an absence of resistance against the social message. Instead of resistance, there is an indication of acknowledgement as well as approval of the social message.

This finding suggests that with an absence of injustice, the participants perceived social messages positively. Therefore, the theme of *approve* captures the manner in which the participants ratified social messages they perceive as positive.

Summary of main themes. The latent themes generated from the young girls’ responses to the social messages they receive about how they must act, think, or feel provided deeper insight into the many ways they respond with resistance to social messages they perceive to contain elements of injustice. When these youth perceived inequity, inequality, or an attack against their character, they responded by exposing the injustice (i.e., *expose*), refusing to accept the message (i.e., *refuse*), defending girlhood by standing up against the injustice (i.e., *withstand*), asserting

their position to fight against the message (i.e., *repel*), or taking action do something differently to protect their dignity and sense of self (i.e., *abstain*). Only in the absence of injustice was there an absence of resistance. Only to the messages the youth perceived as positive and encouraging did they youth respond to *approve* the messages provided.

Summary of Results

This study examines the application of response-based practice theory to the responses of female identifying youth. The findings indicate the participants responded with resistance in many ways to the social messages they perceived as unjust. Throughout the data set, every extract that represented a participant's response provided evidence to suggest they are active responders of their environments and hold the capacity to be aware of injustice. They responded with resistance in ways to *expose*, *refuse*, *withstand*, *repel*, and *abstain* against the injustices embedded within the social messages they received. When they perceived messages in a positive light, they took action to express their acknowledgment, and they demonstrated that they *approved* of the social messages.

The social messages that were most often received by the participants conveyed expectations about how females are to act, think, or feel, in ways that fit within the themes of *subordination*, *strength*, *beauty*, *body appearance*, and *behaviour*. The semantics of the social messages conveyed certain qualities and characteristics of how they are to be (i.e., *be*), and the messages served to express restrictions or limitations to the behaviours they could engage in (i.e., *not*), as well as exemplified the specific obligations they were to fulfill (i.e., *need*). In chapter five, the findings of this study will be discussed in relation to the research question and literature.

Chapter Five: Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore how young girls *respond* with resistance to the social messages promoting what it means to be a female living in society. The intent of the study is to invite deeper insight into the myriad ways young girls respond to these messages, and to honour their agency, capability, and resourcefulness. A thematic analysis was used, in order to examine how the application of response-based practice theory to the responses of female identifying youth can inform professionals who support them.

In this chapter, I will provide a detailed discussion of the findings, including those pertaining to the types of social messages young girls receive from the people in their lives and from society, as well as the ways they respond to these messages. The findings will be discussed in relation to the research question and literature. My interpretations will be followed by my experiences of the research process. I will then offer some implications, limitations, and recommendations of the study, followed by my concluding remarks.

Social Messages

Within the literature, there is support to suggest gender binary advertising and marketing influence how people make meaning of household duties, recreational interests, career aspirations, familial roles, and behaviour nuances (Freeman, 2007; Mager & Helgeson, 2010). In line with this literature, the findings from this study demonstrate the youth are exposed to social messages that convey specific stereotypical definitions of what it means to *be* a girl living in society. For example, with reference to *subordination*, *strength*, and *behaviour* there were several messages reported by participants that both explicitly (i.e., making direct reference to females and males) and implicitly (i.e., implying a gender difference) made comparisons between females and males. Within these messages, females were cast as subordinate to males,

as well as inferior in strength or ability to males. In addition, the messages maintained that females must refrain from engaging in certain behaviours or ways of being because of their gender. These messages made reference to the gender pay gap, education, and differences in ability. The present findings align with prior research that suggests assumptions of patriarchy are highly prevalent (Brinkman et al., 2011; Mager & Helgeson, 2010).

From her work as an activist, academic, psychotherapist, consultant, and supervisor, Burstow (1992) argues young girls are more likely than their male counterparts to receive a vast array of both “liberated and oppressive messages that hopelessly contradict one another” (p. 9). Burstow (1992) states although these messages are influential when offered overtly, when offered covertly the influence can be even more powerful. In the present study, the participants reported receiving messages that females are weak and boys are strong, yet at the same time they also received messages that encouraged females to be strong or messages that acknowledged females *are* strong and capable. These findings are consistent with Burstow’s claims that females are navigating terrains that offer conflicting, sometimes confusing messages about how to be.

Drawing on Burstow’s claims, it is curious to consider whether the messages within *subordination* that cast females as subordinate to males also offer covert messages that undermine the perception of female capability. For example, despite the movement toward encouraging females to pursue their educations and career aspirations (Brinkman et al., 2011), young girls are still navigating social messages that maintain males are superior to females, as suggested by the gender pay gap or by the types of careers considered “acceptable” for females (Freeman, 2007; Mager & Helgeson, 2010). These conflicting messages with reference to *subordination* implicitly imply that although females are capable, strong, determined, and destined to pursue their education and career aspirations, they are not valued with the same

regard as males (Burstow, 1992). In this study, the conflicting messages about how females are to be, act, think, or feel extend beyond the themes of *subordination* and *strength* to those of *beauty*, *body appearance* and *behaviour*.

Throughout the literature, there is an abundance of research pertaining to beauty and body appearance ideals. Consistent with this literature it was expected that the social messages young girls receive involve *beauty*, *body appearance*, and *behaviour* expectations. The findings of the present study suggest participants received social messages about privileged ideals conveying certain types of appearances to which young girls are expected to conform. Examples from this study include “[Girls] are pretty,” “You need to be skinny to be pretty,” “Skinny is pretty, fat is not,” “You need to shave,” “You need to lose weight,” “If you are plus size you can’t wear crop tops or bikinis,” “You are a midget, you don’t have eyebrows” and “Be quiet, perfect, elegant, and clean.”

The findings from this study tie in well with prior studies that found female identifying youth report receiving significant pressures not only from society, but also from loved ones, to conform to stereotypical ideals of how to appear (Ata et al., 2007; Kagestan et. al, 2016; Lawler & Nixon, 2009). Ata et al. (2007) state female youth receive social messages conveyed by society that promote both desirable and undesirable physical attributes which girls feel pressure to follow. Consistent with the latter researchers’ claims, in the present study the appearance ideals participants reported included thinness, tall stature, elegance, perfection, and cleanliness. The findings from the present study indicate beauty is equated with certain physical features and that physical body appearance is a focal point of attention. It is disheartening to see that young girls are navigating within a society that upholds these messages, which both convey rigid ideals and cast shame toward certain aspects of appearance that are considered less than ideal. Many of

the messages the participants reported were nonetheless discouraging and highlight the notion that young girls receive significant pressures from the people in their lives, as well as from society, to conform to these gender expectations.

At the same time, the participants also indicated receiving messages that encourage them to embrace their qualities (e.g., “love yourself,” “you are beautiful,” and “you have great hair”). So once again, female youth are offered conflicting, contradicting, and presumably confusing messages about how they must exist within this world. The findings from the present study also align with the literature that demonstrates youth are exposed to messages that convey expectations of appropriate *behaviour* for their gender (Ata et al., 2007; Auster & Mansbach, 2012; Freeman, 2007; Mager & Helgeson, 2010). The findings imply girls are expected to refrain from certain behaviours (e.g., getting dirty, roughhousing, farting, and disagreeing) or are restricted from others (e.g., going to school, and wearing certain clothing items).

Furthermore, the findings suggest girls are pressured to act in certain ways, such as being “nice, quiet, perfect, elegant, and clean,” and are expected to be accepting in response to disrespect directed at them. The semantics used within the social messages convey that the girls are navigating messages that prescribe an obligation regarding which duties, looks, or roles they must adhere to (i.e., “need to be,” “need to lose,” “need to look,” “need to [do],” and “expected to”), the behaviours they must refrain from engaging in (i.e., “can’t do,” “can’t go,” “aren’t allowed,” “aren’t better,” “don’t [do],” and “shouldn’t do”), as well as the qualities or characteristics they must align with (i.e., “[Girls] are,” “be strong,” “be nice,” “be skinny,” “are for girls,” and “we are”). Overall, these findings suggest the girls are contending with social messages that cultivate idealistic and conflicting expectations of how to act, think, or feel. It is of interest then to examine how these young girls respond to these social messages.

Responses

Drawing on the literature review, there is an abundance of research that investigates how young girls are affected or impacted by the gender expectations promoted by society and social media. Much of the existing research examines how young girls' exposure to the social messages of female gender stereotypes increases their dissatisfaction with their sense of self (Ata et al., 2007; Eyal & Te'eni-Harai, 2013; Lawler & Nixon, 2011; Perloff, 2014; Romo et al., 2016; Slater et al., 2017). The findings from literature suggest young girls are negatively affected or impacted by these messages that promote certain expectations for being. These researchers claim the impact of these social messages leads to negative psychological outcomes such as anxiety, depression, high-risk eating behaviours, and reduced self-esteem (Ata et al., 2007; Eyal & Te'eni-Harai, 2013; Lawler & Nixon, 2011; Perloff, 2014; Romo et al., 2016; Slater et al., 2017).

In the present study, there are findings that might suggest young girls respond to social messages in ways that are consistent with expressions of anxiety, low mood, high-risk eating behaviours, and reduced self-esteem. For example, some participants indicated they responded to the social messages they received with crying or anger. Another participant stated she had hopes of losing weight. Without considering the wider context, these responses might be suggestive of the 'negative psychological outcomes' supported by the literature. However, in considering the context of what these girls are responding to—that is, in this case, the social messages they receive—these responses of crying, anger, and efforts to lose weight can be seen as understandable.

For example, the youth who responded with crying was responding to the social message she received of “You are a midget, you don't have eyebrows.” The youth who responded with anger was responding to the social message she received from a boy who told her she “couldn't

like [a certain genre of movies] because [she is] a girl.” The youth who responded with efforts to lose weight was responding to the social message she received: “Are you pregnant? If you aren’t [you’re] fat.” Each of these social messages conveyed injustice that served to threaten these girls’ sense of dignity. Thus, these expressions of sadness, anger, and effort to achieve a certain appearance emerge as completely understandable responses given the circumstances in which the social messages were delivered (Richardson & Bonnah, 2015; Wade, 2002). Without exploring the context of what these girls are responding to, there is a risk of casting a negative light and seeing them as passive objects who are negatively impacted.

In line with the ideas of response-based practice theory, the present study demonstrates the young girls are active responders in their environments, who engage in intentional and strategic acts of resistance to preserve their dignity (Wade, 1997). The present study affirms Richardson & Bonnah’s (2015) assertion that youth inevitably respond with resistance in situations where their dignity is threatened.

In comparing the findings from this study with those of Wade’s (1997) claims, the majority of the participants’ responses indicate resistance in the form of covert acts. Wade (1997) claims overt defiance is one of the least common forms of resistance. Consistent with this idea, the present findings included only a handful of overt responses. For example, some participants noted they responded with overt actions by verbalizing their opposition or by taking overt action (e.g., ending a relationship, improving academic performance) to reduce or prevent the possibility of a similar situation arising in the future. However, the majority of the responses implied covert action. Wade (1997) maintains that when a person is subjected to injustice the threat of reprisal for acts of self-determination is likely anticipated; thus covert acts, while not outwardly explicit, often prevail as the dominant form of resistance. In line with Wade’s

assertion, the majority of the participants' responses demonstrated covert action in the form of active thoughts.

The participants' responses involved covert and overt acts to *expose*, *refuse*, *withstand*, *repel*, and *abstain* against the social messages they perceived as unjust. Similar to previous studies, the present study reveals the young girls carry an awareness of gender inequalities and that they do in fact actively challenge and oppose these inequalities (Kagestan et al., 2016; Överlien & Hyden, 2009; Pomerantz et al., 2013). With reference to the theme of *expose*, the participants drew attention to the injustices embedded within the social messages they received, by questioning the assumptions (e.g., asking 'why are girls expected to do, act, or feel those ways'), as well as naming them for what they perceived them to be (e.g., sexist, wrong, or just an expectation). In these ways, these young girls were demonstrating their awareness of the injustices embedded within the messages they receive, as well as their disapproval.

With reference to the themes of *refuse*, *withstand*, *repel*, and *abstain*, the findings align with prior studies that demonstrate young girls' capability to respond in strategic ways to act against the social messages that serve to threaten their dignity (Pomerantz et al., 2013; Vogel, 2017; William et al., 2014). Across the themes of *refuse*, *repel*, and *abstain*, the participants of the study explicitly asserted their autonomy with their use of the first-person narrative (i.e., active constructions of the self), in describing their positions to oppose the social messages they receive. For example, the youth stated, "I don't feel [that way]," "I was so angry," "I will prove them wrong," "I may be ugly to you," "I won't," and "I went from [a] C- to B+." This observation ties into Vogel's (2017) findings that demonstrate young girls will position themselves as active agents by refusing to assume the role of victim, and asserting their autonomy to accentuate their capabilities. Furthermore, akin to Pomerantz et al.'s (2013)

findings, the young girls also demonstrated they would adapt their behaviours to be seen in certain ways in order to reduce the potential for further threats against their dignity.

Drawing on the social messages the participants received that cultivate expectations for how they are to act with appropriate behaviour, including being nice and accepting disrespect, the theme of *withstand* captures the ways in which the girls resisted the social messages that are also consistent with the theme of *behaviour*. Through their acts of defending girlhood and standing up with determination against the social messages that promote unwarranted expectations, these young girls demonstrated they would act against the status quo to resist these unjust messages. These youth state, “[Girls] can be whatever they want,” “Girls can do anything boys can do,” and “Every girl is beautiful.” These responses are in line with Williams et al.’s (2014) findings that suggest young girls act against the status quo to emphasize their uniqueness and personal value when they are pressured to conform to certain expectations.

Romo et al. (2016) argue the ways young girls respond to social messages depend on the context of how the message are offered. Consistent with Romo et al.’s claims, the present study demonstrates that in the absence of injustice, there is an absence of resistance. The findings suggest when the participants were offered messages they perceived to be positive or encouraging, they responded to express that they *approve* of the messages. They used words such as “ok” and “thanks” to indicate their acknowledgement and approval of the messages, suggesting these messages take on a different meaning than those that contain injustice.

Coates and Wade (2007) maintain resistance is ubiquitous and that in the face of injustice or adversity, people inevitably resist. Coates and Wade also state that responding with strategic acts of resistance does not necessarily mean the injustice will be stopped; rather, such acts of resistance are “profoundly important as expressions of dignity and respect” (p. 514). Thus,

the findings from this study demonstrate in situations where their dignity is threatened young girls can engage in strategic and intentional acts to oppose the social messages they receive, in order to preserve their dignity and self-respect (Coates & Wade, 2007). Similar to previous studies, the present study demonstrates youth can use a variety of creative, intelligible, and strategic methods of responding that are both overt and covert (Hauge et al., 2002; Överlien & Hyden, 2009; Richardson & Bonnaah, 2015).

The findings of this study support the notion that youth respond with resistance against the social messages they perceive as unjust. For example, the participants demonstrated that they respond with resistance in ways to *expose*, *refuse*, *withstand*, *repel*, and *abstain* against the injustices embedded within the social messages they receive. In addition, when the participants perceived messages in a positive light, they took action to express their acknowledgment and demonstrated that they *approved* of them. The findings of this study, therefore, demonstrate that these youth are in fact active responders, who employ a variety of actions to uphold their dignity in the face of injustice.

Summary of Interpretations. The findings from the present study demonstrate the profound influence of social messages in the lives of youth, and provide an example of how young girls use their own self-knowledge to take action to resist the social messages that promote unrealistic expectations. The social messages the girls in this study report receiving suggest they are contending under tremendous pressure to conform to rigid expectations. Embedded within many of the social messages are implicit or explicit implications that serve to cast shame on young girls if they do not conform. For example, certain body appearances were depicted as undesirable compared to others, and certain behaviour were portrayed as socially unacceptable for females.

The influence of these social messages serves to govern how young girls make meaning about their existence within the world (Ata et al., 2007; Auster & Mansbach, 2012; Freeman, 2007; Mager & Helgeson, 2010). Their responses indicate they are aware of the injustices directed toward them, and therefore they actively resist in order to challenge these narratives. Most of the responses the girls provided indicate covert forms of action, and this observation highlights the importance for professionals to be curious about youths' responses. Such curiosity appears essential in order to uncover the insightfulness with which youth can respond with resistance (Hauge et al., 2002; Richardson & Bonnah, 2015).

In situations where participants received the social messages favourably, their responses demonstrated approval of the messages. These social messages included ones that made reference to *beauty* (i.e., "you are beautiful") and *strength* (i.e., "we are strong").

Furthermore, it is telling to explore the findings that are less clearly expressed within the data. The absence of social messages that portray the bravery, cleverness, confidence, courage, creativity, intelligence, and uniqueness that young girls carry is striking. In line with Burstow's (1992) work that suggests young girls are navigating contradicting terrains about how to exist, it seems likely that young girls do receive such positive and encouraging messages, and that the ways in which they respond may align with the theme of *approve*. Be that as it may, it is interesting to note that implicit within the ways girls responded to the social messages they perceived as unjust, they acted in ways that portray their bravery, cleverness, confidence, courage, creativity, intelligence, and uniqueness. By shifting the focus from seeing youths' responses as effects of a cause, attention can instead be cast on the ways youth respond with characteristics consistent with agency, capability, and resourcefulness. Using such a lens invites

conversations to be had with youth that build upon the strengths they carry, in order to generate possibilities for new ways of making meaning of their experiences.

Experience of the Research Process

As the researcher for this study, I was honoured with the opportunity to engage in conversations with the young girls that illustrated the very power these girls carry. After conducting the data collection procedures, I engaged the group members in a discussion about the activity. Most of the girls were eager to share their experiences of navigating the social messages. I would describe the atmosphere in the room as impassioned, yet respectful and curious.

Through gentle facilitation using response-based practice questions that encouraged the girls to share how they responded (e.g., what they did, what they thought, and how they felt in response to the social messages they received), a wealth of insight into the meanings they ascribed to their current situations was revealed. Some of them expressed their frustrations with the structures within societies (e.g., political, educational, ideological, and cultural structures) that continue to uphold the narratives of how young girls are expected to exist within the world. Some of them also recognized and acknowledged the privilege they carry as females living in Canada, and how the opportunity to access elementary and post-secondary education in Canada far exceeds that of Eastern nations.

Other girls spoke about their experiences navigating the social messages they identified, with an added layer of ethnic and spiritual identities. These youth shared that not only are they contending with social messages that prescribe standards or expectations for how to be a female in society, but also that they are dealing with messages that maintain certain gendered cultural expectations. For example, one girl described her cultural background, as requiring females to

ensure their male counterparts are provided with enough food. She described this expectation as being one-sided. That is, she stated if her brothers express they are still hungry she must share her food with them, but if she expresses a desire for more food, her brothers are not expected to share with her. This youth expressed her frustration and discontent with the unfairness embedded within this gendered cultural expectation. She described that within her culture, females are most often positioned as subordinate to males.

As I reflect on the discussion I had with these young girls, it is amazing to see the depth of insight, understanding, and meaning that is revealed by the use of response-based practice conversations and curious inquiry. These conversations demonstrate youth are actively responding to and are aware of the multitude of layers that combine to pose limitations or restrictions on them, and that they are continually challenging these ideas and expectations.

Finally, the discussion closed with the group expressing how prevalent these social messages of gender stereotypes and expectations are in their lives, and how they are rarely afforded a platform through which they can openly talk about their responses, perspectives, and emotions pertaining to these topics. These comments struck me. Although I anticipated that the use of a response-based practice conversation would elicit vastly different responses than those of an effects-based one, I was struck by the girls' acknowledgement that this conversation was different from those they had engaged in previously. As I reflected upon their comments, I wondered whether perhaps the rarity of these conversations is influenced by societal presumptions of youth as lacking the capacity for insight and awareness (Richardson & Bonnah, 2015).

Implications

The present study set out to examine how an application of response-based practice theory to the responses of female identifying youth informs professionals who support them. The findings of this study suggest that the use of response-based language offers insight into how female identifying youth respond with resistance to the social messages of female gender stereotypes operating in society. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that response-based language generates deepened insight into the context, intentions, and meaning the youth ascribe to their experiences.

Response-based practice theory is an orientation that differs from many of the mainstream perspectives (e.g., child development models, bio-medical models) that guide understanding about the experiences of youth (Richardson & Bonnah, 2015). Thus, the application of response-based practice theory to the work professionals engage in to support youth will involve a paradigm shift for some. Richardson and Bonnah (2015) describe that within the realm of child psychology, developmental models construct narratives that maintain ideas of what is considered “normal,” “healthy,” or “adaptive” responses for youth (p. 209). When a youth’s responses do not conform to these definitions of what is considered appropriate, the responses are typically referred to as indicative of deficits (e.g., pathology, disorder, unfavourable attributes) *caused by* an adverse event (Richardson & Bonnah, 2015). According to Richardson and Bonnah, this view limits the range of possibility for understanding youths’ responses when their actions defy the predictability of the model. Richardson and Bonnah (2015) state, “when a young person responds with [resistance]...their physical, spiritual, emotional, and intellectual responses cannot be categorized as normal, or abnormal, rather under careful scrutiny, they become understandable” (p. 209). The response-based practice lens thus encourages

professionals to see youth in a light that constructs them as active responders who are interactive, intentional, insightful, and aware (Richardson & Bonnah, 2015).

In the present study, the use of response-based questions encouraged youth to construct themselves as active responders, and further encouraged them to refer to their actions in the first person. With the use of response-based questions, professionals can elicit conversations that provide youth with an opportunity to express their insights, understandings, and ways of making meaning of their experiences.

The study also reveals youth have many questions and curiosities about the social pressures of gendered expectations, particularly questions about how and why these pressures serve to influence the societal structures in which they live. This finding aligns with Richardson and Bonnah's (2015) assertion that youth are perceptive analyzers of context.

Although the scope of the study did not extend as far as examining the influence the professional has as a social responder to youth, it could be argued that through the use of response-based language insight is generated regarding the influence of the professional. As mentioned previously, the use of effects-based language encourages vastly different conversations than those of response-based language. According to response-based practice supporters, the language of responses offers dignifying conversations that honour the inner knowing that responders carry (Richardson & Bonnah, 2015; Wade, 1997).

Other advocates of a perspective that youth are agentic, such as Hauge et al. (2002), also encourage professionals to engage in conversations with youth that build upon the youths' agency, as doing so offers a platform that fosters communication skills and autonomy while providing the youth with a sense of credibility for their expressiveness (Hauge et al., 2002). By

responding to youth in ways that honour their autonomy, perceptiveness, and expression, the professional can serve to be a positive social responder to them.

The findings of the present study strengthen the claims of other researchers and advocates of youth agency perspectives, and can inspire other researchers and professionals to adopt a similar lens or at least consider that youth are active, capable, and resourceful beings. These implications are not intended to discount or deny perspectives that support child development models, or orientations such as the bio-medical models of understanding, but rather to encourage alternative ways of understanding youths' experiences. In inviting conversations that generate insight into the context of youths' responses and experiences, the possibility of uncovering different narratives that exist alongside the dominant story is expanded. A benefit of using response-based language is the illumination of new meaning in the story youth construct about their experiences, drawing on the agency, capability, and resourcefulness they possess.

Limitations & Recommendations

The scope of the present study was to generate deeper insight into the responses of a particular group of female identifying youth, and as such the generalizability of this study is limited to this specific population of youth. The population selected for this study is a small group of girls who shared some similar demographic backgrounds, in addition to being members of a group program that centers on the experiences of female identifying youth. As noted in the results chapter, the majority of the social messages reported carried connotations of injustice. It could be argued that the participants of the study had an idea about what the researcher was curious about, and thus chose to report the social messages that contained elements of injustice. As the researcher, I took steps to minimize my influence within the data collection process by

not referring to social messages as either positive or negative, and instead used the term *social messages* as an all-encompassing expression.

With respect to future research, it would be interesting to adapt the activity used in the study to different social groups: for example, youth who identify as gender variant, transgender, male, or who come from different cultural backgrounds and ethnicities. This research would serve to invite greater insight into the responses of youth across different identity factors. It would be interesting to see how their responses might be considered understandable within the context of the identity factors at play.

The questionnaire used in the data collection procedures was designed with three specific questions, in order to produce brief statements from participants about the social messages they receive as well as the ways in which they respond to the social messages. The findings of this study could be strengthened by the use of an interview style data collection procedure. An interview approach could offer greater insight into the context of the social messages the participants receive: for example, who offered the social message, how it was offered, and in what setting. Further, such an approach could provide even deeper insight into the nature of the responses themselves: for example, the events of the interaction including the participants' thought processes, the responses of others toward them in turn, as well as the subtleties in the nonverbal behaviour between the participant and the other parties. In this way, the response-based conversation could elicit more understanding of the meanings the participants ascribe to the situations they experience, and could also elicit further insight into the agency they carry.

Concluding Remarks

The present study used a qualitative case study design with a thematic analysis to examine the research question, *How does the application of response-based practice theory to*

the responses of female identifying youth inform professionals who support them? The findings demonstrate youth are active responders who employ a variety of strategic and intentional acts to resist the social messages they perceive to carry elements of injustice and inequality. These youth revealed that they respond in both overt and covert ways to demonstrate their resistance against the social messages that maintain the unrealistic expectations to which they are expected to conform. This study also demonstrates that social messages of female gender stereotypes carry a profound influence on the meanings young girls ascribe to how they are to exist. Thus, the findings highlight the importance for professionals to engage in exploratory conversations with youth, so as to uncover the ways in which youth respond to these messages. The findings clearly indicate young girls possess capability to respond with agency, creativity, and resourcefulness.

This research study highlighted to me the importance of inviting conversations that unpack social narratives with youth. The findings demonstrate that the interactions young girls experience with societal narratives influence how they respond with resistance to protect their dignity and sense of self. Through the facilitation of conversations premised on the ideas of response-based practice theory and curiosity, a wealth of insight into the experiences of this particular group of young girls was achieved. The study aimed to shine a light on the myriad ways in which young girls respond. By shining the light on these young girls' responses of resistance, it is revealed that these young girls *are* in fact brave, clever, confident, courageous, creative, intelligent, and unique beings.

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Appendix A

'What it is like to be a girl' Questionnaire

Participant Code:

1

What it is like to be a Girl.

In the box below, please write down examples of the social messages you receive about what it is like to be a girl. Social messages means the things you hear from the people in your life as well as from social media, television, music, and books, about what girls are suppose to be like, act like, feel like, or even think like.

Now I invite you to share some or all of these examples of these social messages of what it is like to be a girl with the group by writing your examples on the flip chart paper labeled "Being a Girl."

Please read the examples provided by your fellow group members, and I invite you to reflect upon these messages.

I invite you to select at least one example of a social message that you have experienced, and write the example(s) in the box below.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

For each example of a social message that you have experienced, I invite you to share how you responded to the particular message. For example, you can share what you have done or what you do, what you have thought or think, or what you have felt or feel, about the particular message. Please write these in the box below.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

Appendix B

Activity Outline - What it is Like to Be a Girl

Materials: What it is Like to Be a Girl Questionnaires, pens, markers, flip chart paper, tape.

Before starting the activity: Tape flip chart paper to the wall, and write 'Being a Girl' in the center of the page.

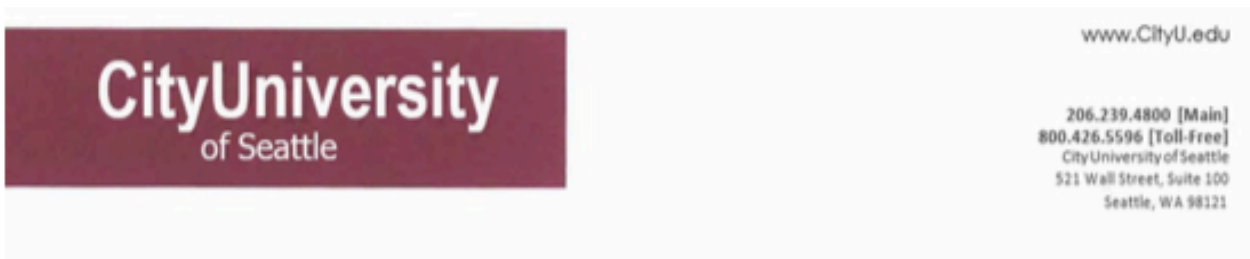
Activity: Bring the group together into a circle. Handout questionnaires and pens.

- **Provide a brief introduction to the activity.**
 - Example of introduction: In this activity we will be talking about what it is like to be a girl living in our society today. You will be asked to reflect on your experiences about what it is like growing up as a girl.
- **Direct the group members' attention to the questionnaire.**
 - Begin by inviting members to write down in the first box on the handout, examples that come to mind for them, about the social messages they receive about what it is like to be a girl. Describe that these social messages might be the things they hear from the people in their lives as well as from social media, television, music and books. The messages would be things about what girls are supposed to be like, act like, feel like, or even think like. Invite members to ask questions for clarification. Provide approximately 5 minutes for group members to brainstorm on their handout.
 - Invite group members to come up to the flip chart paper and to record some of the examples they have written on their handout onto the flip chart.
 - When group members have written their examples, invite them to quietly reflect on the examples they have written as well as those their group members have provided on the flip chart. Provide approximately 2 minutes for the reflection.

- Invite members to turn the handout over. Instruct members to select at least one example of a social message that they have experienced, and record those on the lines provided in the box. Allow approximately 3 minutes for completion.
- Instruct members to record how they responded to the social messages they selected in the above question, which might include what they have done, or what they do, what they have thought, or what they think, or what they have felt or feel about the particular message they have selected. Invite members to ask questions for clarification. Provide approximately 5-10 minutes for completion.
- Collect questionnaires.
- **Engage group in a group discussion.**
 - Ask group members how the activity went for them.
 - Summarize the messages listed on the flip chart.
 - Ask group members about their thoughts or feelings about the messages written on the flip chart.
 - Validate the experiences shared.
 - Ask group members how they navigate these messages, how they respond, and what they do, think, or feel in response.
 - Allow members to share their stories. Provide validation, empathy, and encouragement.
 - Ask group members if they have any questions or concerns.
 - Thank group members for their participation, and remind group members of the available psychological services.

Appendix C

Institutional Review Board Certificate of Approval



Institutional Review Board Certificate of Approval

IRB ID# Lalari_Brieddal083018

Principal Investigator (if faculty research):
Student Researcher: Parcilla Lalari
Faculty Advisor: Susan Breiddal
Department: DAS MofCP

Title: Being a girl: How young girls respond to social messages.
Approved on: August 30, 2018
Renewal Date: August 30, 2019

- Full Board Meeting Date of IRB meeting: _____
 Expedited Review (US)
 Delegated Review (Can)
 Exempt (US)

CERTIFICATION

City University of Seattle has reviewed the above-named research project. The proposal was found to be acceptable on ethical grounds. The Faculty Advisor Susan Breiddal and the student researcher Parcilla Lalari have the responsibility for any other administrative or regulatory approvals that may pertain to this research project, and for ensuring that the authorized research is carried out according to the conditions outlined in the original Ethical Review Protocol submitted for ethics review. This **Certificate of Approval** is valid for the above time period provided there is no change in experimental protocol, consent process, or documents. Any significant changes to your proposed method, or your consent and recruitment procedures should be reported to the Chair of the Institutional Review Board in advance of its implementation.

ONGOING REVIEW REQUIREMENTS

In order to receive annual renewal, a status report must be submitted to the IRB Chair for Board consideration within one month of the current expiry date each year the study remains open, and upon study completion.

Brian Guthrie Ph D, RSW, RCSW
Chair, IRB City University of Seattle