LIMITED BY LANGUAGE:
WORDS, IMAGES, AND THEIR EFFECT ON WOMEN

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May 2014

A Thesis Presented to The Honors Tutorial College, Ohio University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation from the Honors Tutorial College with the degree of Bachelor of Fine Arts in Graphic Design
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CRITICAL OVERVIEW

Women made incredible strides over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: They earned the right to vote, combated discrimination and sexual harassment in the workplace, fought for reproductive rights, and made gains in political and corporate spheres. As individuals, women negotiated the tension between work and family life and gained greater freedom to define womanhood on their own terms. But contemporary American society is still fraught with many inequities, complexities, and contradictions for women. Though the issues range in type and scope—from the underrepresentation of women in Congress to the prevalence of sexualized depictions of women in mainstream media—they are similar in the sense that they cannot necessarily be addressed through changes in law or policy. Instead, these issues seem to stem from insidious and deep-seated perceptions about women and femininity. In this thesis, I propose that the words and images we use to describe and depict women help damaging ideas about womanhood and femininity circulate in our culture—and that those ideas perpetuate the inequities that women face today. My visual work is an exploration of graphic design as a mode of social commentary and a vehicle for social change.

My research, which explores the effect of the language and images that we encounter every day in mainstream American culture, is situated within an area of feminist study that suggests that the personal is political. In “Performatve Acts and Gender Constitution,” Judith Butler proposes that, though subjective experience is shaped by broader societal conditions, it also affects those conditions. She writes,
“Feminist theory has sought to understand the way in which systemic or pervasive political and cultural structures are enacted and reproduced through individual acts and practices, and how the analysis of ostensibly personal situations is clarified through situating the issues in broader and shared cultural contexts.”\(^1\) As an integral aspect of our everyday lives, language is key to our “individual acts and practices.” Though the words we use in day-to-day contexts—like girl, beauty, bitch, sweetheart, or babe—may seem inconsequential, their impact extends beyond the everyday. Considering the words we use about women as part of a “broader and shared cultural context” suggests that language can help shape and perpetuate widely held, and often damaging, perceptions of women’s worth and role in our society. For example, I argue that an association between the word girl and the sexualized images of young women that circulate in mainstream media helps foster damaging ideas about women’s sexual authority and individual worth.

My work is situated within a cultural climate in which many people either reject feminism or assume that it is antiquated. Because the inequalities that women face today are subtler than those faced by women in the past, many Americans seem to believe that feminism is no longer important or even necessary. Women in positions of influence often reject the term, which they associate with the “man-hating” and aggression that people often associate with the second wave. For example, Marissa Mayer, who became the CEO of Yahoo in 2012, asserted, “I don't think that I would consider myself a feminist. I think that I certainly believe in equal rights … but I don't, I think have, sort of, the militant drive and … the chip on the shoulder that sometimes
comes with [feminism].”² In the realm of popular culture, Geri Halliwell, the lead singer of the Spice Girls, a music group that was popular with young girls in the 1990s, claimed that feminism did not align with her ideas of femininity: “For me feminism is bra-burning lesbianism. It's very unglamorous … We need to see a celebration of our femininity and softness.”³ These misconceptions about feminism—which characterize it as a “militant,” aggressive, and radical movement—suggest that feminism is antithetical to femininity and promote a damaging perception that traditionally feminine and strictly gendered characteristics are central to womanhood.

These perceptions of femininity—which align womanhood with traits like the “softness” that Halliwell described—negatively affect women, especially when women behave in ways that break from expectations of traditional femininity. This issue is particularly apparent in the workforce, an area of society in which women are still striving to gain equality. For example, the New York Times reported that women must approach requests for higher compensation in the workforce differently than men do. When women “advocate for themselves,” they can be perceived as “overly demanding and unlikable.” As a result, they are often denied an increase in compensation.⁴ Though employers may not recognize this as overt or conscious sexism, cultural ideas of femininity—that women are more modest, selfless, and team-oriented than men are—clearly skew their expectations of female employees’ behavior. An examination of our language, which contains many words to describe women’s “softness” or “sweetness” and “demure” nature, illuminates the damaging perceptions of femininity that affect women today.
Because many Americans consider feminism to be a dated and anti-feminine movement, mainstream ideas about female empowerment are instead defined by consumerism and individualism. Mainstream media suggests to women that success is defined not only by academic, social, or professional achievements but also by an ability to stay slim, to be successful in the domestic realm, and to be beautiful and stylish. To achieve these ideals of feminine success, women are encouraged to “prioritize consumer practices.” Perhaps more damaging, contemporary rejection of feminism assumes that a movement that promotes women’s equality is no longer needed. Yet, sexism still permeates mainstream American culture.

The idea that feminism is unnecessary—that one can support women but reject feminism as a movement—creates significant challenges for women in contemporary society. Rachel Fudge describes this in “Girl, Unreconstructed,” an article originally published in *Bitch* magazine. She writes that a rejection of traditional feminism “turns [women’s] struggle inward, depoliticizes and decontextualizes the cultural messages about gender and behavior … If, as Ann Powers wrote nearly a decade ago, girls are seen as ‘free agents,’ they have only themselves to blame for their failures.” By using language to illuminate the insidious sexism that permeates cultural constructs of women and femininity, my work challenges the notion that feminism is no longer necessary. I hope to undermine perceptions that women are individually responsible for any inequities—the wage gap, the corporate glass ceiling, misrepresentation in mainstream media—that still exist in American society. Instead, I propose that those
inequities are perpetuated in part the by the widely held and often damaging ideas of femininity that are apparent in visual and verbal language.

However, language is not necessarily the sole cause of the issues that women face in contemporary society. The language we use to refer to women is also a reflection of the long-standing inequities that exist in our culture. In *Language and Woman’s Place*, Robin Tolmach Lakoff argues that linguistic imbalances are worthy of study because they can illuminate issues that we may not otherwise recognize, but she asserts that we cannot effect social change simply by changing the way we speak. Lakoff writes that imbalances in our language are “clues that some external situation needs changing, rather than items that one should seek to change directly.”

I hope that my juxtapositions of mediated images with everyday language about women will help readers notice how words reflect and illuminate the harmful perceptions of women that circulate in our culture.

Michel Foucault’s theories of discourse, in which he proposes that language shapes cultural systems of power, are central to my research. Similar to Butler’s assertion that personal experiences can affect political and cultural structures, Foucault observes that our language, however “humdrum and grey it may seem,” has the ability to shape culture. Specifically, he asserts that discourse plays a key role in the creation and perpetuation of structures of power and domination: “Conflicts, triumphs, injuries, dominations and enslavements lie behind these words, even when long use has chipped away at their rough edges.” According to Foucault, questioning dominant discourse—such as the prevalence of sexist language—is worthwhile because that
language often limits oppressed individuals’ ability to create and define their own identities. He writes that dominant discourse is a “form of power” because it “categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him.” According to Foucault’s theory, the host of words that our language contains to describe women—like beauty, babe, demure, sweet, girly, lovely, bitchy, etc.—play a key role in limiting definitions of gender and femininity. Our words about women help build the “laws of truth” that structure cultural perceptions of gender. If those definitions are not challenged, damaging ideas about gender and femininity will continue to proliferate in mainstream culture.

In recent years, conversations in the fields of media and cultural studies have encouraged design theorists and scholars to consider how meaning circulates through culture. In Graphic Design Theory, Meredith Davis describes the “interpretive life cycle” of visual messages in society: Messages are created, then reproduced, distributed, and consumed by culture. Because this process is cyclical, the creators of visual messages both influence and encode “the language and understanding” of a particular culture. The understanding that visual communication is influenced by the author’s cultural experience is key to a post-modern perspective on design, which rejects modernist ideas that “good” design has the ability to communicate “honestly” and universally. I acknowledge this understanding in my work, which is heavily influenced by my experience as a young woman in contemporary American society.
As key authors in the message cycle, graphic designers have the opportunity to create messages that reach broad audiences—and hence to potentially influence societal trends and attitudes. In *Clean New World*, Maud Lavin, a cultural and visual historian, asserts that graphic designers must recognize and take responsibility for their “immense ability to communicate.” She asserts that “the challenge to graphic designers is to focus less exclusively on formal concerns and more on the context and content of the message.” Design critics have also recognized that graphic design can contribute to systems that encourage consumption and discourage political or social activism. In “Communication Design: A Social Practice,” Jan van Toorn describes the way that graphic design can sometimes sublimate problematic messages: “The inevitable difference between the reality of existence and the representation of it disappears in a conflict-free staging, design—a bombardment of fragmentary impressions that is so fascinating that as consumers and citizens we are hardly concerned with the reality behind the images and messages of the culture industry.”

The “conflict-free stagings” often present in visual communication can cause people to accept, or at least become numb to, damaging or problematic messages—like the messages about gender that my work critiques.

In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger proposes that images are a visual record of cultural perceptions, specifically perceptions of femininity. Berger’s theories are key to my research, and they support the assertions that Lavin and van Toorn make about the importance and influence of visual messages. Berger writes, “Gradually it became evident that an image could outlast what it represented; it then showed how something
or somebody had once looked—and thus by implication how the subject had once been seen by other people. Later still the specific vision of the image-maker was also recognized as part of the record. An image became a record of how X had seen Y.\(^{14}\) Representations of women created in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries certainly function as a record of how “a subject had once been seen by other people.” As a result, these images are a key focus of my study. On a broad scale, I propose that mediated images are a reflection, or a record, of the cultural perceptions of women that are apparent in our language. More specifically, I support the feminist theory that many mediated images of women are embodiments of a dominant (white, straight, middle class) heterosexual male perspective—a perspective that is also apparent in the words we use to describe women’s bodies and appearance.

As I conducted research, I was inspired by the work of three key visual communicators: Marshall McLuhan, Ellen Lupton, and Maureen Cummins. In *The Medium Is the Massage*, *Design Writing Research*, and *Deeds*, respectively, these authors combine visual and verbal language to comment upon social and cultural issues. I used this method, which is sometimes referred to as multimodal communication, as a model for research, writing, and visual exploration.

In *The Medium is the Massage*, McLuhan explores the effect of media upon society by juxtaposing his writing with images and illustrations. For example, when discussing the way that the introduction of printing impacted society’s relationship with information, McLuhan states that printing “provided the first uniformly repeatable ‘commodity,’ the first assembly line—mass production.” He presents that
sentence alongside repetitions of the phrase “printing, a ditto device” and a full-page image of blackletter text. By using visual metaphors to enforce his ideas, McLuhan addresses the reality that our experience of media is based in both visual and written information.

In Deeds, Maureen Cummins combines written and visual language in such a way that the reader cannot experience one without considering the other. Cummins prints the narrative of an Indigenous American directly overtop deeds from government purchases of tribal land. As a result, readers not only experience the dynamic between the deeds and the narrative. They also must consider the visual nature of the deeds themselves, which often interact and sometimes interfere with the printed text. Though I combine images and written language in a slightly more traditional way than McLuhan and Cummins do, an integration of visual and linguistic information was key to my process and the results of my research.

Ellen Lupton also synthesizes visual and written information in Design Writing Research, a book of essays published by Lupton and J. Abbott Miller. Many of the essays in the book, including “Graphic Design in America” and “White on Black on Gray,” are socially or culturally focused. Lupton combines visual and written information in a more traditional way than Cummins and McLuhan do—many essays consist of long-form text and discrete images. However, the authors’ visual choices allow the reader to easily decode and comprehend meaning. Sometimes, those visual choices directly enforce the content of an essay. For example, in “Period Styles: A Punctuated History,” Lupton gradually changes the format of the text to demonstrate
the evolution of the structure of the written word. By doing so, Lupton uses both written information (the text of the essay) and visual information (the visual presentation of that text) to illuminate changes in communication over time. While I did not experiment with text in such an involved manner, Lupton’s subtle integration of visual and written elements influenced many of my choices.

Over the course of this project, I conducted inquiry in four main ways: reading the work of critics and scholars, researching language through personal conversations and dictionary resources, collecting and analyzing images found online and in print, and creating exploratory sketches and writing. I began my research by reading critical analyses written by scholars of visual communication design, philosophy, art theory, media studies, feminism, and etymology. My key sources included Robin Tolmach Lakoff’s *Language and Woman’s Place*, John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing*, Barbara L. Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts’s “Objectification Theory,” Michel Foucault’s “The Subject and Power,” Maud Lavin’s *Clean New World*, Naomi Wolf’s *The Beauty Myth*, and the *Oxford English Dictionary*. These sources gave me the critical foundation necessary to analyze the visual and verbal language I gathered during my research.

To build a relatively comprehensive collection of the words our culture uses to describe women, I referenced the *Oxford English Dictionary* and several thesauruses and also conducted many Internet searches to find slang terms in online conversation. Perhaps most important, I consulted with people, both men and women, to see what terms they had encountered—whether they had used the words, had been called or
described by the words, or had simply heard or read them. The people I spoke with ranged in age, from my peers in their twenties to women in their seventies. The list of words that I collected is included in this thesis. I compiled a shortened version of the list and recorded women who range in age, from an 11-year-old girl to a 67-year-old woman, as they read through the words. In the thesis exhibit, this recording accompanies the three bound documents that present my research. The women’s voices suggest that the language my research explores not only exists in print but also occupies our spoken language and affects women in all phases of life.

I collected images through a process of print and online research. Several databases, including ARTstor and Duke University Library’s Ad*Access, were key to my research. These databases allowed me to access images that were created over a range of time, from the beginning of the twentieth century to the present. I also referenced my own experience as an audience for the advertisements and images that circulate in everyday life. As I collected images, I grouped them by subject matter or connotation. For example, I created one set that included images that showed the aspects of women’s bodies that are most often sexualized in visual media, another that included images that depict women from a dominant heterosexual male perspective, and another that included images that portray women gazing at themselves in mirrors. This process allowed me to understand and analyze trends in the ways that women are depicted in visual media.

As I collected resources, I began to conduct visual and written exploration. Through digital and analog sketching and freeform writing, I was able to discover
relationships between the words and images I had compiled. For example, I paired images of women looking in mirrors with adjectives that we often use to describe women’s appearance and then with verbs that describe the process of self-assessment. I also placed adjectives that we often use to describe traditional femininity, like *demure* or *lovely*, in conversation with images that carried complementary or contrasting connotations. To discover relationships between the words themselves, I used analog techniques to group words that hold similar connotations. Many of these explorations were guided by my personal experiences as a woman in American society, but they were also shaped by my visual, critical, and etymological research. For example, my experience as a member of a generation that began to use the Internet early in childhood prompted me to conduct Google searches for a number of words, including *girl* and *woman*, as part of my exploration. The critical and etymological research I conducted early in my process allowed me to analyze the images, which I compiled in a book, in a meaningful way.

I hope that the published results of my research—three artist books, titled *Gaze, Assess, Adjust; Girls Will Be Girls*; and *Words and Images: Women Online*—will draw attention to the connection between the language we use to describe women and the damaging perceptions of femininity that affect women in this culture. The content of the books I created prompts readers to consider how those perceptions circulate via visual and verbal language. Though the books address specific issues—the use of the word *girl* to refer to young women, dominant male perspective in visual and verbal language, and depictions of women online—they illuminate broader
patterns that have affected women for centuries and that perpetuate the inequities and complexities that American women face today.
Notes


12. Lavin, *Clean New World*, 80


17. The manuscript of each book is included in this document.
What does it mean to be a girl in contemporary American society? Does it mean that you are a female child? Or does it mean that you are a young woman, probably unmarried and possibly sexually attractive?

As a woman in my early twenties, I often feel that I occupy a vaguely defined place in American culture. I notice that my female peers and I are usually referred to as young women in most formal situations. Yet, in casual social situations, we are much more likely to be thought of as girls. We aren’t, as a close friend once asserted, women yet—only when we marry, become mothers, or establish careers will we earn that description. She estimated that this might happen when we are about thirty, or maybe thirty-five, years old. This view seems to be common, at least among my peers.

In contrast, I have noticed that men in their early twenties are more likely to be thought of as guys—not boys. Guy seems to be a transitional, or at least neutral, term: It indicates that a young man is past boyhood but that he has not yet reached the manhood traditionally defined by a career, marriage, and family. In this culture, we do not possess a similar term to describe that period of transition in female life. Instead, the *Oxford English Dictionary* states that *girl* can describe both a child and a young woman.¹ Sometimes, this overlap seems relatively benign. When *girl* is used to refer to a woman in casual conversation—especially between women or in friend groups—it often implies a sense of camaraderie that *woman* and *young woman* do not connote.
This is apparent in the multiple terms and phrases that women use to refer to friends, including “girlfriend,” “the girls,” and “girls’ night.”

But, as Robin Lakoff asserts in *Language and Woman’s Place*, discrepancies in our language are worthy of our attention and consideration. They can indicate “inequities and imbalances” that we might be unaware of otherwise. When we think of the word *girl*, a number of associations may come to mind: a female child, a female friend or peer, a young woman. But we also increasingly use the word to describe the women who appear in our media in sexualizing, and sometimes demeaning, poses and contexts. The women in these depictions are often young, and they usually embody popular ideals of beauty and sexual attractiveness. The images they appear in, which circulate in our media and our cultural consciousness, help foster damaging perceptions of female sexuality.

When I refer to a girl (or girls) in this essay, I am describing the stereotypical association these images help promote—that of a sexualized, sexually available, and often young woman, a girl-as-object.

Contemporary mediated images of girls typically imply that they are sexually attractive and, often, that they are available to heterosexual male advances or anxious for male attention. Because we associate the word *girl* with youth, and often with actual childhood, these visual messages carry troubling connotations. When girls are depicted in overtly sexual ways, the line between genuine girlhood and sexuality becomes uncomfortably blurred, undermining young women’s perceived sexual authority. Girls are also often depicted in groups, which suggests to the viewer that
young women are commodities, available in plentiful supply for male pleasure. Ultimately, our association between the word *girl* and the sexualized images of young women that circulate in our media undermines our perceptions of young women’s sexual autonomy and even their individuality.

Though the exact etymology of the word *girl* is unknown, the earliest recorded use of the term in 1300 refers to “a child of either sex.” In approximately 1375, the word was first used to describe “a young or relatively young woman.” The word *boy* was not widely used to refer to male children specifically until about 1440, sixty-five years later. Because *girl* originally referred both to children and to young women, we can reasonably assume that young women were once considered comparable to children. Once *girl* lost its gender neutrality and began to be used as the counterpart to *boy*, English speakers apparently did not develop a different term to describe young women. Instead, *girl* continued to suffice. One can imagine that this is because young women were already associated with childhood.

Our language never seems to have developed words that clearly separate young women from childhood. Yet, terms have long existed to describe young men who are transitioning from childhood to adulthood. Though *guy* only began to be used to refer to a young man in the 1800s, the term *youth* was first recorded as denoting a “young man between boyhood and adult age” around 1325. Unlike young women, young men were likely considered further removed from characteristics that define childhood, like naiveté, dependence, and physical weakness. (It is no coincidence that those characteristics are traditionally gendered feminine.)
Even terms that we often use in pairs to refer to males and females—such as girl and boy, guy and gal, and guy and girl—do not necessarily carry comparable connotations. Though girl and boy may feel like counterparts, their connotations are not entirely equivalent. This is apparent in the disparity between the ways these terms are used to refer to adults. We might say that we are “going out with the boys” or reference soldiers as “our boys.”

Beyond those uses, boy is seldom used to respectfully refer to adult men. In contrast, girl—which is considered benign in casual speech—is regularly used to describe women. In the early and mid-twentieth century, gal was used in everyday life to refer to young women. However, girl has almost entirely replaced gal, which sounds antiquated to many Americans today. The word may have fallen from use because its connotations do not seem far removed from those of girl.

Compared to boy and guy, gal and girl feel particularly interchangeable. In fact, the Oxford English Dictionary simply provides “girl” as the definition for gal, stating that the word is an elided, or shortened, form of girl.

A cursory study of evolutionary biology could help explain why we associate the word girl with young women who appear in sexualized depictions in visual media. In The Evolution of Desire, evolutionary theorist David Buss discusses why heterosexual males seem to have a preference for youthful mates. (In the United States, husbands are about three years older than their wives on average. In general, a trend of older husbands and younger wives is apparent across many cultures.) Buss argues that this preference is a logical, and potentially biologically programmed, response to the relatively small span of time in a woman’s life in which she is able to reproduce. After
age twenty, a woman’s fertility begins to steadily decline; by age fifty, she is most likely unable to bear children. It makes sense, then, that the term girl is used to describe women who are young enough to be considered viable partners. Recall that the most literal definition of girl—“a female child”—aligns young women with children. More figuratively, the word suggests that the woman it refers to is young, fertile, and ultimately desirable. That being said, heterosexual males’ desire for youth is not simply expressed by a preference for younger partners. Instead, an emphasis on youth seems to have fostered a fetishization of traits that extend beyond obvious physical cues.

When we describe and depict young women as girls, we align them with characteristics of childhood that young men are linguistically distanced from when we refer to them as guys. The sense of youth that the word girl implies not only signals nubile sexual attractiveness and viability. It also creates a sense that young women are innocent, naive, and either unable or unlikely to resist advances, effectively establishing them as sexually available and pliable to male desire and dominance. The word suggests that a young woman is sexually inexperienced and may be vulnerable a man’s influence.

In visual media, girls are often shown smiling and wearing revealing clothing, and they are regularly posed in ways that expose their bodies to the viewer. These images imply that the young women pictured are physically available, and happily so. When girls are shown in a group, they regularly outnumber men depicted in the same visual narrative. This essentially suggests to the heterosexual male viewer that young
women not only exist for his pleasure but also that they are available in potentially limitless numbers. If girls are shown with a man, their gazes are frequently directed toward him in adoration or lust, and they often touch him suggestively. In extreme and deliberately absurd depictions, they chase him, tackle him, and physically fight other girls for his attention.

In “Objectification Theory,” Barbara L. Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts propose that objectification is defined by the “experience of being treated as a body (or a collection of body parts) valued predominantly for its use to (or consumption by) others.”11 Sexualized depictions of girls, especially those that imply that the women pictured are innumerable and available, discourage us from considering women’s sexual and even personal autonomy and individuality. Images that show women in groups tend to carry more overtly sexual connotations than those that show individual women. This suggests that we may feel more comfortable sexualizing a woman if it is possible to dismiss or at least lessen her apparent individuality.

Depictions that suggest that girls are innumerable and sexually available help foster a perception that young women are essentially commodities—that, as Fredrickson and Roberts observed, they are “valued primarily for their use to (or consumption by) others.”12 In some images, women’s bodies are depicted as objects for consumption, sometimes in the most literal ways. Because images of attractive women are effective devices for selling a wide range of actual commodities, advertising messages often align girls with products. These messages imply that the women pictured cannot, or at least will not, object to the viewer’s imagined advances.
Just as a cigarette, a car, or a bottle of liquor can be used in any way and at any time that the purchaser desires, these images suggest that women, too, are available at whim.

Images of girls often suggest that women are accessories to male pleasure, which undermines perceptions of women’s personhood and individuality. This attitude is embodied by the overtly sexualized images of women published in many men’s magazines. These images typically portray women in a way that aligns with the girl-as-object stereotype I describe in this essay: The women are posed in ways that expose their bodies to the male viewer, and it is often implied that they are flirtatious or available. Even the experience of reading the magazine—in which one encounters sexualized images of girls page after page—subtly implies that women exist in unlimited supply to fulfill desires. Hugh Hefner, the founder of a magazine that famously uses the term “Playmates” to describe the women featured in its sexualized centerfolds, described this depersonalization in a 1962 radio interview. He asserted, “For Playboy, the roles of the sexes are clearly defined. Society remains essentially masculine… You’ll note that our girls in Playboy are called ‘Playmates’… and they complement and suit a man and his needs.” Hefner’s choice to dub the women featured in the magazine “Playmates”—while characterizing the magazine’s male readers as “Playboys”—exemplifies the perception that all women are potential playthings, especially in sexualized contexts. Though Hefner made this statement more than fifty years ago, Playboy continues to circulate in our culture, giving visual form to the demeaning attitudes about women that he described.
The term *girl* is often clearly aligned with sexualization and, sometimes, actual sexual commodification. It is telling that the word can be used to describe women involved in prostitution or the adult-entertainment industry. Though prostitution is illegal in the United States and is considered taboo in mainstream American culture, we sometimes use the same term to describe female prostitutes that we use to refer to the sexually attractive young women who appear in our media. As a literal commodification of the sexual body—and, more broadly, of women as individuals—prostitution offers women as objects to consumers. Like the products that women are often aligned with in advertising, prostitutes are perceived as perpetually available. If a client has money, he also has access to girls—in this case, prostitutes. In advertisements for adult entertainment, the repetition of “girls, girls, girls” suggests that an unlimited number of women exists for the customer’s enjoyment. Mediated images of girls communicate a similar message—that the young women featured are commodities that can be purchased or won.

Without a word to describe young women in casual conversation or popular culture, we are left with *girl* as the partner to *guy*, even though its undeniable link to childhood makes its connotations especially troublesome. Because our language is bound by established cultural norms and expectations, changing the way we speak in our everyday lives can be difficult. It seems more meaningful to realize that the words and images we use and create can illuminate biases that we might not recognize otherwise. They are a map of our collective imagination, including our most deep-seated and limiting perceptions and prejudices about women. If the images we are
surrounded by suggest that young women exist as objects of male desire, we are bound to carry limited and skewed perceptions about women’s role and worth. When we think of sexualized young women as girls, we are confirming, whether consciously or not, a pervasive cultural dismissal of young women’s personal and sexual authority. We are accepting a perspective that denies women’s dimensionality and individuality and instead suggests that a woman’s worth is defined by her body and the pleasure it can bring to others.
Notes

4. Ibid., s.v. “Boy.”
5. Ibid., s.v. “Guy.”; Ibid., s.v. “Youth.”
7. Lakoff, *Language and Woman’s Place*, 56.
12. Ibid.
I frequently encounter images that promote and idealize female beauty. When I was a girl, those images made me feel insecure; they convinced me that I could look like the women depicted if I just bought the right products. Now that I’ve become desensitized to these ubiquitous images, however, they mostly feel monotonous to me, like background noise as I move through my daily life. In fact, I see images that depict idealized female beauty so frequently that I often feel that contemporary American society is saturated with them.

These images circulate in all media and appear in nearly every environment and venue, from streets to stores to the screens of computers and televisions. Beautiful women gaze alluringly from the covers of magazines; they appear in advertisements of every kind; they fill television, movies, and music videos. Though they are portrayed in myriad ways, they often fall into familiar stereotypes—sexy and alluring, friendly and sweet, manipulative and vain. Regardless, these depictions create a perception that beauty is a defining characteristic of femininity. They suggest that the most successful women are not only intelligent or otherwise accomplished but that they also embody a narrow and idealized notion of beauty. Often, these images seem to imply that beauty is, in fact, the only female attribute that matters.

The terms society has used to describe women during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries certainly support this perception. A woman can be a babe, fox, doll, honey, vixen, or hottie; she can be a “first-class beauty” or “look like a million dollars (or bucks);” she can be described by a host of adjectives, from buxom to
voluptuous to shapely, that speak directly to the appearance of her body.¹ These terms are part of a visual and verbal system that has been built from a dominant (straight, white, middle-class) male perspective. As John Berger explains in *Ways of Seeing*, the ubiquity of male perspective in visual media encourages women to turn male evaluation back upon themselves.² Women scrutinize and attempt to control their bodies in pursuit of an ideal that is emphasized as key to feminine success and happiness. Ironically, and tragically, women who pursue this ideal are often dismissed as vain and self-obsessed.

American culture’s fixation on idealized female beauty is apparent in the way many mainstream visual narratives are framed. As John Berger asserts in *Ways of Seeing*, women have traditionally been the objects, not the subjects, of visual representation.³ (Consider the number of female nudes painted or sculpted by male artists, or imagine a contemporary advertisement that shows a woman posed the way a straight man may desire to see her.) Producers of photographs, advertisements, and films often assume that the viewer is male and frame the featured women from his perspective. Essentially, women are portrayed differently from men because men are assumed to be the “ideal” viewers.⁴ This imbalance suggests that straight male perspective is the norm. It also seems to indicate a fundamental discrepancy between our perception of male and female influence. Jonathan Schroeder notes that “to gaze implies more than to look at—it signifies a psychological relationship of power, in which the gazer is superior to the object of the gaze.”⁵
The male gaze can also exist in an image when a man is shown looking at a woman or, sometimes, multiple women. Though these images assume a neutral subject, they reinforce a subtle but widespread perception that women are objects of male evaluation. As I studied visual representations of women produced in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, I found that images that show men gazing at women seem to suggest that the women depicted are scenery or that they serve no purpose other than to look beautiful. Images that show men viewing women can also emphasize women’s role as objects, not subjects, by associating women with products to be appreciated. The women in these images often avert their gaze from the male spectator and from the camera, implying that they are passive and perhaps unaware of the man’s and the audience’s evaluation.

Because heterosexual male perspective has influenced American depictions of women for so long, perceptions of beauty and of femininity in general have followed suit. Throughout the twentieth century, the existence of overt white privilege fostered a conception of female beauty that devalued and disregarded women of color. Even today, the economic and cultural authority of Western nations helps sustain a limiting association between whiteness, beauty, and femininity. As a result, narrow ideas of beauty—typically characterized by fair or suntanned skin, long hair, and a slim figure—have become widely accepted norms. In the early twentieth century, these limited ideas of beauty were often depicted as vital aspects of womanhood. I analyzed many advertisements from the early twentieth century that suggested, and sometimes literally stated, that an idealized and highly subjective idea of beauty was key to
finding a husband and to achieving happiness in general. If a woman was unattractive or failed to devote proper attention to her appearance or hygiene, she risked a life without marriage and social popularity. According to many advertisements, a woman’s happiness depended on, and was sometimes defined by, her ability to emulate mainstream culture’s beauty ideal.

The words we use to discuss women reflect the emphasis placed on female beauty in much visual media. We describe women using adjectives—alluring, beautiful, blooming, busty, buxom, curvy, lovely, pretty, shapely, voluptuous—that would rarely be used to describe male bodies or men in general. Nouns—including babe, beauty, dish, doll, honey, hottie, kitten, knockout, sweetheart, and vixen—are ascribed to women who men find desirable. In fact, male evaluation of female bodies is so prevalent that we possess terms, ogle and leer, to describe it. Interestingly, those terms imply the discomfort inherent to many women’s experience of intense male assessment.9

Many people use terms like beautiful and babe to refer to women whose appearance aligns with the idealized images of female beauty that circulate in our culture. The words seem to be a reward for, or at least an acknowledgment of, a woman’s attention to her appearance and willingness to imitate established ideals. If a woman purchases the beauty products advertised, dresses in a certain way, and devotes time and attention to controlling her body, she can hope to be thought of as “beautiful,” “lovely,” or “shapely” or to be seen as a “doll,” “vixen,” or “babe.” As many ads in the early to mid-twentieth century asserted, attractive women are more
likely to enjoy social popularity or to have romantic success. In contemporary society, women thought to be “beautiful” are still widely revered, envied, and desired. In fact, a woman’s appearance has been shown to have a greater effect on her social and romantic success than a man’s does.¹⁰

Women who do not meet the standards of beauty prevalent in our media are less likely to enjoy the same benefits that women who are considered “beautiful” do. We possess a wide range of terms that deride unattractive or ordinary-looking women and essentially dismiss their relevance and influence in mainstream culture. If a woman is considered ugly, she may be referred to as a “dog,” a “cow,” a “troll,” a “beast,” or a “hag” or be described as “frumpy” or “mousy.” If she is older than the young women who appear in idealized depictions, she is even more likely to be criticized. In general, women are harshly scrutinized based on appearance and perceived age far more than men are. In the workforce, women are more likely to be discriminated against or perceived negatively as a result of “unacceptable” appearance. Even the most obviously successful women in contemporary American society are intensely scrutinized based on appearance. Public attitudes and opinions about Sarah Palin and Hillary Clinton, both highly visible politicians, exemplify this. When I searched for each politician on Google, the search engine suggested statements about how the women look “old,” “older,” “tired,” “overweight,” and “anorexic.” Google did not offer similar queries for most male politicians.

In American culture, women learn early in life to closely scrutinize their own appearance—to survey themselves as they imagine others will.¹¹ By monitoring her
appearance, a woman can gauge how she will be perceived and how others will treat her. Clothing, cosmetics, and beauty products in general are the most apparent manifestations of this preoccupation with appearance. All of these products promise women greater ability to control their appearance, to mold it to conform to established ideals. As a result, many women devote significant amounts of time, money, and energy to personal grooming and presentation.12

Our language reflects this. American vernacular includes many terms and phrases that describe the efforts women take to control their appearance. Women can “dress up,” “prep,” “primp,” “preen,” and “accessorize.” They can “get pretty” or get “dolled up,” “gussied up,” “glammed up,” and “tarted up.” A woman can also “put her face on” or “put herself together,” both of which imply that she is not presentable, or even whole, without some form of attention to cosmetics or dress. Though we do not use all of these phrases in contemporary society—and though some, like “putting your face on,” are often used in jest—their existence in our lexicon indicates that women have long concerned themselves with methods to “improve” their appearance or to actually alter themselves.

John Berger asserts that “men act and women appear.”13 Our mediated images of women make this clear, and the language we use to describe women’s appearance reinforces our cultural fixation on female beauty. Based on Berger’s assertions and my own experience as a woman in American society, I believe that women’s focus on personal appearance may be born out of, or at least exaggerated by, the shallow depictions and descriptions of female beauty that circulate in our culture. Nonetheless,
women are accused of vanity and narcissism when they devote attention to their hair, makeup, clothing, and bodies. Innumerable images of women gazing at themselves in mirrors, published throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, are evidence of this double bind. Women are shown looking lovingly at their own reflections, adjusting their hair or clothing, applying makeup, and often touching their own faces in adoration or evaluation. They are sometimes shown gazing at themselves in compact mirrors in the midst of other activities, suggesting that their preoccupation with appearance is so strong that it interrupts daily life. These images support the perception that beauty is key to womanhood. Perhaps more damaging, they imply that beauty is all that women are concerned with.

Many women accept the premise that they must to devote time and energy to their personal appearance—more so, at least, than most men do—to gain acceptance and admiration in mainstream American culture. This perception, though it may be unconscious or appear natural to many, encourages women to constantly monitor their bodies and to pay close attention to their appearance as they move through the world. Women ensure that their hair is in place, that their makeup is not smudged, and that their clothes are flattering at all times. Our descriptions and depictions of women encourage them to believe that their bodies are “objects of vision” open to the appreciation and the scrutiny of others. They suggest to women that achieving our culture’s beauty ideal will bring success—and that a woman can achieve that success if she buys the appropriate products and devotes time to presenting herself a certain way. Our words and images imply that if a woman is a “babe,” she may be desired or
envied; if she is a “beauty,” she may be admired or loved; and if she devotes the proper amount of care to “putting herself together,” she stands a better chance of earning respect.

I often question my own attention to appearance. I wonder if the pleasure I find in coordinating outfits or applying makeup is born out of deeply embedded cultural ideals—ideals that suggest that women who are thought to be “beautiful” are the most enviable, desirable, and socially acceptable. Because our society places such emphasis on gendered beauty, decisions about appearance can feel crucial, and can sometimes be bound in painful double standards, for many women. I believe that this predicament will lessen only when women are able to define their own approaches to self-expression and beauty, approaches that extend beyond the ideals prevalent in our visual media and supported by our language. If those approaches and redefinitions are embraced by mainstream American culture, our limiting fixation on idealized female beauty may begin to wane.
Notes


4. Ibid., 64.


10. For support for the claims about gender inequity in this and the next paragraph, see Fredrickson and Roberts, “Objectification Theory,” 178.


15. Ibid., 180.
I was born in 1992, at the beginning of a decade that would see the rise of the Internet and of personal computing in general. The Internet feels as though it has always been present in my life—I can’t remember the first time I used it, or even how old I was. I do remember the boxy desktop computers that I learned basic skills on in kindergarten and the computer that my mom worked on in her home office—the creaking noises it made while loading, the blinking of a cursor on its simple green-and-black screen, and the dial-up tone that connected it to a broader web of information. My first experiences using the Internet were limited: I mostly played online games or wrote emails to long-distance friends under the close supervision of my parents. Though my access was limited, Google was the front door to my online experience. I quickly learned that it was the way to access the sites I wanted to visit and, later, that it could offer answers to nearly every query I had.

Today, if we have a question, we “Google it” and assume that the search engine will return the results we’re seeking. (It nearly always does.) Google is a popular starting point to inquiries of almost every kind—personal, humorous, informational, academic. It is essentially a catalog of the Internet, and the Internet is arguably a catalog of much of contemporary American life. According to the Pew Research Center, approximately 85 percent of American adults used the Internet on a daily basis in 2013, while about 15 percent did not. Adults over 65 comprised nearly half of non-users; other non-users cited a lack of interest or an inability to conveniently access the Internet. While these numbers show that a relatively
significant number of Americans are still not online, they mainly indicate that the Internet has become an integral, or at least undeniable, aspect of contemporary American life.

The Internet’s strong presence in my own life, coupled with my interest in language and gender, made me curious about the results that Google might return for words like *woman* or *girl*. I specifically wondered about the types of images that the search engine might provide. To begin, I simply searched for *girl*. Because the most literal definition of the word is “a female child,” I expected my search would primarily return images of female children. Instead, I saw a range of results that also included many images of young women who embody mainstream ideals of beauty and female sexuality. I realized that Google searches return the most stereotypical, not necessarily the most literal, images that might come to mind when one thinks of a girl. Google, it seemed, could reflect popular imagination—and perhaps even indicate English speaker’s most widely held visual associations.

With this speculation in mind, I researched the strategy that Google uses to compile the images that appear in searches. To collect content, Google travels through links on the web and aggregates images and text—a strategy commonly referred to as “crawling.”² Google classifies images using keywords. Those keywords can appear in the url of the webpage on which an image appears, in text that surrounds the image on that page, or in links to the image. Google then ranks images using several factors. If an image is associated with the same keyword on multiple webpages, it will likely appear higher in search results. If an image appears in close proximity to the keyword
on a webpage or is linked to often, it will also be ranked higher. Essentially, images that are frequently connected to relevant terms are ranked highest.\(^3\) This presumably means that the images that people most closely associate with a word appear first in Google searches.

After learning this, I focused my method of searching for images. I was curious to see if references to age affected the likelihood that a woman might be depicted in a sexualized context. I also wondered if the word girl might be more closely associated with sexualized images, regardless of the age of the women depicted. To test my hypothesis, I conducted separate searches for the words girl and girls, then woman and women. Searches for girl and woman returned images of relatively young and conventionally attractive women, but the results for girl included a greater number of overtly sexualized images. It also seemed that searches for the plural words—girls and women—returned more sexualized images than searches for the singular terms did. (A search for woman returned the fewest sexualized results, while searches for women and girls returned the most.)

After making these discoveries, I wanted to see if image search results could reveal changing cultural perceptions of girls and women over the course of time. I conducted more specific searches using previous search terms—girl, girls, woman, and women—combined with decades. For example, I conducted a search for the terms “girls 1910,” then “girls 1920,” and so on. I limited the range of my searches, including only the twentieth century and the first decade of this century. Finally, I searched for various nouns and adjectives to see how words that we often use to
describe women align, and also often conflict, with the roles that women fill in contemporary society.

This book is a collection of what I discovered. The images are a reflection of English speakers’ perceptions of women in an age when our experiences, ideas, and attitudes are increasingly cataloged online.
Notes


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Bibliography


