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Popular Music, Girlhood and Identity

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the role of popular music in the construction of young female identity. Research has shown that girls use music to express a sense of identity. However, this process is not yet fully understood. This study addresses this, exploring how girls use popular music to construct identities. Focus groups and interviews were conducted in England with 53 girls aged between 10 and 13, exploring how they used discourse to express opinions about music. To interpret this data, a thematic analysis was carried out. The participants had strong opinions about how audiences should engage with music, how music should sound and how performers (particularly female performers) should appear and behave. These opinions reflected wider beliefs about art, gender and selfhood. Through their discussions, the girls invoked a gendered dichotomy; “good” music was described as serious, authentic, autonomous and masculine, while “bad” music was dismissed as “fake”, trivial, worthless and feminine. Their discussions were extremely individualistic, promoting an idealised version of commodified selfhood based on self-expression, self-work and self-construction. The girls used musical judgements to align themselves with certain values, and this allowed them to take up more powerful subject positions. However, although this offered them a form of individualised empowerment, their ability to use this power was highly constrained; because they saw themselves as individuals, they were largely unable to access collective forms of support, resistance and power. This research situates girls within their wider cultural context, examining how individual girls are constrained by oppressive social structures. To address these issues, a more comprehensive approach to music and media education is required, as well as a more nuanced, socially-conscious approach to girls’ personal and social education. Ideally, strategies to support girls must go beyond individualistic self-help initiatives, instead focusing on wider social structures which impact on girls’ lives.

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1 Introduction

Who's to say that young girls who like pop music – short for popular, right? – have worse musical taste than a 30-year-old hipster guy? That's not up to you to say. Music is something that's always changing. There's no goal posts. Young girls like the Beatles. You gonna tell me they're not serious?

—Harry Styles, interviewed in *Rolling Stone*, April 2017

Throughout the history of popular music, young female listeners have been trivialised and denigrated. Girls, it is assumed, have bad taste in music. Often, girl listeners are characterised as shallow and unsophisticated, and it is widely assumed that they lack the necessary knowledge and critical skills to appreciate music properly. As stated by pop star Harry Styles in his interview with *Rolling Stone*, it is assumed that girls are not “serious” about music (Crowe, 2017, para. 21).

These negative beliefs about young female pop fans (sometimes referred to disparagingly as “teenyboppers”) reflect wider attitudes towards women and girls. Coates (2003) argues that teenyboppers are united by two things: their supposed bad taste and their femaleness (p. 68). Within the popular imagination, girl pop fans embody various female stereotypes; they are assumed to be passive, conformist and hysterical, and their engagement with music is thought to be affective, embodied and immature (Driscoll, 2002, p. 186). In contrast, (older, male) rock listeners are thought to have a more rational, intellectual engagement with music (Douglas, 1994, p. 5; Warwick, 2007, p. 5). Tracing these ideas through rock history, Coates argues that, since the 1960s, young female pop fans have been cast as grotesque Others. As a result, girl listeners have often been overlooked by musicologists, music historians and critics, despite their central role in rock and pop history (Dougher & Pecknold, 2016; O'Brien, 1995). My research focuses specifically on girls, shedding light on how they engage with popular music.

The stereotype of the passive girl pop fan helps to maintain the hierarchical distinction between pop music and other more respected popular styles, such as rock music (Coates, 2003).¹

Although pop and rock are both forms of popular music, pop is generally understood as a trivial form of “low” culture, while rock is thought to be a more authentic, and therefore more

¹ In recent years, other popular styles, including rap and hip-hop, have begun to be taken as seriously as rock music by music critics and writers. Within the media, hip-hop auteurs like Kanye West are portrayed as creative “geniuses” and innovators, echoing the treatment of revered rock singers, musicians and songwriters (Houston, 2014). However, this development does not trouble the gendered distinction between pop music and other popular styles; like rock music, hip-hop is a male-dominated genre, which is associated with the performance of hyper-masculinity (Grant, 1996; hooks, 1994, p. 116, 2004, pp. 59–60; Oware, 2011).

valuable, style (Keightley, 2001). In particular, manufactured, commercialised pop music is designated as the lowest popular style (Leach, 2001, p. 146). Some scholars have argued that this idea is gendered, suggesting that pop music is devalued *because* of its association with femininity (Railton & Watson, 2011, p. 75). Baker (2001) suggests that gendered terms such as “bubblegum pop” and “teenybop” further entrench the notion that pop music is girly, feminine and worthless (p. 363). These ideas echo Huyssen’s (1986) claim that mass culture is positioned as the weak, feminine Other in opposition to the masculinised concept of “high” art (pp. 44–62).

Early popular music scholarship did little to dismantle these negative attitudes towards female fans. In their 1978 paper “Rock and Sexuality”, Frith and McRobbie argued that pop music romanticises traditional feminine gender roles, offering girls “the freedom to be individual wives, mothers, lovers ... [and] glamorous, desirable male sex objects” (Frith & McRobbie, 1990, p. 381). In his 1981 work *Sound Effects*, Frith (1983) characterised girls as private consumers of popular music, whose listening takes place within the domestic confines of the bedroom. Furthermore, he argued that when girls *do* engage publicly with popular music (such as on the dancefloor at discos and parties), they use it primarily as a means to find a male partner. In this analysis, Frith constructs girls as functional (rather than aesthetic) listeners, whose engagement with music facilitates the performance of patriarchal femininity (pp. 225–234).²

Recent studies paint a more complex picture of girls’ engagement with music. In particular, qualitative, participant-based studies provide a unique insight into girls’ listening habits and their interpretation of musical texts. In her research with 8- to 12-year-old girls, Einerson (1998a) found that popular music played an important role in their negotiation of gendered identities, and in their understanding of themselves as social actors. Similarly, Bloustien (2003) found that her young female participants (who were between the ages of 15 and 18) used music to represent themselves to their peers, and to signify cultural and ethnic identities. In her participatory research with pre-adolescent girls (between the ages of 8 and 11), Baker (2001) observed that her participants used music to negotiate, represent and experiment with different identities. Fritzsche (2004) reported similar findings, noting that the girls in her study (who were between the ages of 10 and 17 years old) used the materials and imagery of pop music as a “toolbox” to construct identities (p. 159). Chittenden’s (2013) research into Taylor Swift’s online fanbase extends these findings, exploring how young female fans use pop music to

² Later works by Frith and McRobbie apply a more nuanced and sensitive approach to issues of gender and sexuality, acknowledging the complex, reciprocal relationship between female listeners and popular music (Frith, 1996; McRobbie, 1991). Indeed, in his 1985 piece “Afterthoughts”, Frith criticises his work with McRobbie, dismissing their earlier paper “Rock and Sexuality” as “awfully dated” and lamenting the fact that, in 1985, it was still frequently cited (Frith, 1990, p. 420).

construct their own personal stories. Through her analysis, Chittenden found that, by drawing on song lyrics and their own memories (both real and imagined), girls create narratives which reinforce their own sense of identity.

Some researchers argue that popular music can help girls manage the challenges and pressures of adolescence. Einerson (1998a), for example, suggests that pop music offers girls a shared experience of adolescence, while Fritzsche (2004), Lemish (1998) and Lowe (2004) suggest that it offers girls an opportunity to experiment with different modes of femininity. Fritzsche takes this idea further, arguing that popular music helps girls to “cope with”, and sometimes actively resist, the demands imposed on them during adolescence (p. 160). Weekes’s (2004) research, which foregrounds race and ethnicity, echoes these findings, showing how young black girls actively challenge the misogynistic content of popular music, in order to construct more empowered identities.

These qualitative studies challenge the notion of the passive girl listener, demonstrating the creative and imaginative ways that girls engage with music. They also show how girls use music to express themselves, exploring and resisting various discourses of femininity. However, more research is needed to gain a more in-depth understanding of the ways in which girls interpret and engage with popular music, and how they use music in their everyday lives. In particular, the process of identity construction remains under-explored, and there is a need for a more comprehensive scholarly investigation of the link between music and the production of identity. This study addresses these issues, exploring the relationship between popular music, girlhood and identity. Specifically, this thesis addresses one key question: what role does music play in the construction of young female identity?

1.1 Young people, popular music and identity

As Gracyk (2001) states, identity is closely related to cultural context. Consequently, girls’ beliefs about identity are shaped by the media culture surrounding them (Budgeon, 2003; Kearney, 2006). Studies support this, demonstrating that musical engagement is a deeply personal experience for both girls and boys, and that it has a profound influence on how young people understand their sense of self (Laiho, 2004; Larson, 1995; Ruud, 1997; Tarrant, North, & Hargreaves, 2000). According to Laiho (2004), music provides a framework or “meta-structure” which individuals use to construct coherent selves (p. 54). Over time, music becomes intertwined with personal stories and memories, creating a continuous sense of stable selfhood. As DeNora (2000) notes, music is used “as a device for the reflexive process of

remembering/constructing who one is, a technology for spinning the apparently continuous tale of who one is” (p. 63).

There is also evidence that young people use music in their social lives to negotiate interpersonal relationships, and to construct a sense of group identity. Social identity theory has proved useful in research investigating the link between music and young people’s social relationships (Bakagiannis & Tarrant, 2006; Hargreaves, North, & Tarrant, 2016; Tarrant, North, & Hargreaves, 2001). Social identity theory maintains that individuals derive a sense of “social identity” from their membership of social groups; the term “social identity” refers to the sense of meaning and belonging that people experience when they are part of a group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Musical taste plays an important role in the construction and negotiation of social identity. Research shows that young people view music as a signifier of group membership, and that they rely on statements about music to differentiate between group members and outsiders, since members of groups tend to share the same (or similar) musical tastes (Tarrant et al., 2001; Tarrant, North, & Hargreaves, 2002). This body of research demonstrates the significance of music as a social marker, showing that ideas about music influence how people are seen by others, as well as how they see themselves. As such, music plays a role in the construction of both individual and social identity, bridging the gap between the private and public realms (Hesmondhalgh, 2013, pp. 1–2). My own work addresses identity from both of these perspectives, exploring how girls use music to construct an internal sense of identity (in other words, a sense of personal, or subjective, identity), and how they use music in their social lives to communicate a sense of identity to others.

The study of identity is particularly pertinent to research involving adolescent audiences. Adolescence is widely understood as a period of identity formation, during which individuals are expected to forge subjective adult selves (Driscoll, 2002; Harris, 2004a, 2005; Lesko, 2012; Wyn & White, 1997). The concept of adult subjectivity (as it is currently understood) relies on a nineteenth-century conception of childhood (Baker, 2001; Currie, Kelly, & Pomerantz, 2009; K. M. Smith, 2014), which positions the child as an innocent, pre-subjective Other in relation to the adult subject (Castañeda, 2002, p. 168). Since childhood and adulthood are seen as oppositional states, it follows that there must also be a transitional stage, during which children become adults. Adolescence emerged as a meaningful construct in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries (Dyhouse, 1981; Gorham, 1982). In the mid-twentieth century, German-American psychologist Erik Erikson (1963) theorised that identity was formed during adolescence, when children begin to make sense of their place in the world. As such, subjecthood is assumed to be the necessary goal of adolescence. In this way, the concept of adolescence supports the dominant ideology of contemporary society; as Giddens (1991)

observes, the subjective self is central to modernity, and the ideal modern subject is independent, autonomous and reflexive. Adolescence is therefore constructed as a time when individuals must develop these qualities.

For girls, adolescence presents specific problems. Not only are girls expected to prepare for adulthood, they must also prepare for womanhood, and all of the tensions, contradictions and difficulties that this entails; indeed, Aapola, Gonick and Harris (2005) note that “the key ‘tasks’ of adolescence – achieving sexual, physical and emotional maturity – are shown as deeply gendered and gendering experiences” (p. 132). Within patriarchy, the subject is conceptualised as an essentially masculine construct, while femininity is associated with object status. Girls must therefore come to terms with the impossibility of forging subjective female selves in a patriarchal culture which denies the possibility of feminine subjectivity. Late modern girlhood is thus seen as a state of instability and weakness, in comparison with the strength and stability of male subjectivity; as Driscoll (2002) argues, feminine adolescence is a “demonstration of the difficulty of becoming a subject” (p. 7). This idea is now firmly embedded within mainstream thought, and female adolescence is generally considered a problematic and challenging time for girls, who must learn to navigate confusing and contradictory discourses relating to femininity and sexuality (Currie et al., 2009; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; K. A. Martin, 1996; Tolman, 2002). This idea was promoted enthusiastically during the 1990s by psychologists such as Gilligan (L. M. Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Gilligan, Lyons, & Hanmer, 1990) and Pipher (1994), who argued that adolescent girlhood was a time of risk and danger. This narrative of crisis had a profound impact on educational policy, youth policy, and medical and psychological practice, shaping the way that girls are treated within contemporary society (Gonick, 2006; Harris, 2004a; J. V. Ward & Cooper Benjamin, 2004).

Popular music is widely associated with childhood, adolescence and youth, and it plays a major role in the lives of both girls and boys (J. D. Brown & Bobkowski, 2011; Campbell, 2010; S. G. Davis, 2016; Minks, 1999). On average, young people are highly engaged with popular music (Christenson & DeBenedittis, 1986; Laiho, 2004; Roe, 1985), and research suggests that adolescents listen to up to three hours of music per day (Miranda, 2013; Roberts, Henriksen, & Foehr, 2009; Tarrant et al., 2000). Today’s young people are growing up in a highly-stimulating media culture and, as a result, they are constantly surrounded by an array of audiovisual media products, including music videos, films, television programmes, online videos and video games (Vernallis, 2013). Popular music provides a backdrop to the everyday experiences and social interactions of children and young people, who use music as both a source of entertainment and an accompaniment to various activities, including socialising, studying and playing (Bosacki, Francis-Murray, Pollon, & Elliott, 2006; Campbell, 2010; S. G. Davis, 2016; Minks, 1999;

Roberts & Christenson, 2001). Longitudinal research indicates that adolescence is a critical period in terms of the development of musical taste (Holbrook & Schindler, 1989; North & Hargreaves, 1995). During adolescence and young adulthood, people's musical tastes tend to become more stable and coherent, as they start to develop ideas about how music should sound. As a result, people's adolescent musical preferences tend to have a bearing on their tastes later in life. Equally, adults tend to evaluate music according to the standards of the music that they preferred in adolescence (Hargreaves et al., 2016). It is therefore vital to explore how young people's tastes develop, and how they express their tastes in their everyday lives. My own research focuses on this issue, exploring the relationship between girls' tastes and their sense of identity. This helps shed light on my main research question, offering insight into the role that music plays in the process of identity construction.

1.2 Girl culture, girl power

Research into young people's listening habits has consistently shown that girls report listening to more music than boys (J. D. Brown, Walsh-Childers, Bauman, & Koch, 1990; Greenberg, 1973; Lyle & Hoffman, 1972; Roberts & Foehr, 2004; Roberts et al., 2009), and that they interpret popular music as a meaningful part of the female adolescent experience (Baker, 2001; Einerson, 1998a, 1998b; Garratt, 1990). Consequently, girls represent a lucrative popular music market. Towards the end of the twentieth century, a new "girl culture" emerged to cater to this market, which was based around the experiences of contemporary girlhood (Driscoll, 2002; Kearney, 2006; G. Wald, 1998). Within girl culture, the figure of the girl embodies ideas of femininity, youthfulness, desirability and consumerism. Because of this trend, girls have become hyper-visible within popular culture and the wider media (Aapola et al., 2005; Driscoll, 2002; Harris, 2004b; Projansky, 2014).

Girl culture encompasses a wide range of popular media aimed at a young female audience, including film, television, literature, journalism, online media and popular music. Since the 1990s, children's films have turned to the subject of girlhood, focusing on young female characters, and this trend is evident in the recent resurgence of the "Disney princess" film (Do Rozario, 2004; England, Descartes, & Collier-Meek, 2011; Hefner, Firchau, Norton, & Shevel, 2017) and in the rise of live-action "teen movies" aimed at girls (Colling, 2017; Hentges, 2006; Tally, 2005). Television has seen a similar trend, demonstrated by the global popularity of girl-oriented teen sitcoms such as *Hannah Montana* (2006–2011) and *Sam & Cat* (2013–2014), both of which feature youthful, independent-minded female characters. Girl-focused young adult

fiction has also experienced a major surge in popularity in recent years; for example, the fantasy romance series *Twilight* (2005, 2006, 2007, 2008) by Stephanie Meyer and the dystopian adventure trilogy *The Hunger Games* (2008, 2009, 2010) by Suzanne Collins have attracted a dedicated female fanbase, and both have been adapted into lucrative film franchises. These media texts centre around experiences that are assumed to be fundamental to girlhood: parental and sibling relationships, female friendships, school and heterosexual romance. However, although the stories told in these texts may differ on the surface, they generally portray a very narrow version of girlhood, based on an idealised version of thin, white, heterosexual, middle-class, able-bodied, Western femininity (Driver, 2007, p. 9; Hentges, 2006, pp. 13–14).

The rise of girl culture has been accompanied by a proliferation of consumer products aimed at girls, including toys, merchandise, cosmetics and clothing (Harris, 2005; C. Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2005). High street fashion retailers carry clothing ranges aimed specifically at a very young demographic of female consumers (Russell & Tyler, 2002), while toys aimed at girls (such as Barbie and Bratz dolls) promote a hyper-feminine, objectified version of commodified girlhood (Hains, 2008; C. Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2005). These products tap into the broader ideals of contemporary culture, constructing girlhood as a consumerist endeavour, associated with fashion, shopping and beauty work (Griffin, 2004; McRobbie, 1997).

In order to widen the appeal of “teen” girl culture, the media and manufacturing industries have worked to drive down the age of the girl market and, over the course of several decades, teen products have been aimed at an ever younger audience (Harris, 2005, p. 213; C. Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2005, p. 5). As a result, media texts which once would have been aimed at a teen audience are often now consumed by a younger audience of “pre-teen” or “tween” girls: girls who are not yet teenagers, but who nonetheless engage with forms of teen culture. Some scholars argue that this feminised notion of “tweenhood” should be viewed as a marketing conceit rather than a natural stage of development, suggesting that the concept of the tween was created intentionally by corporate marketers around the turn of the new millennium (D. T. Cook & Kaiser, 2004; Coulter, 2014). My own research focuses principally on girls who are on the cusp of adolescence and “teen-hood”, who are just starting to outgrow the tween stage. In doing so, my work examines this crucial transitional stage, which is loaded with cultural meaning.

Girlhood itself has become a central theme within popular music. As explained at the start of this chapter, popular music (particularly mainstream pop) has long been associated with young femininity. However, in recent years, it has become increasingly “girlified”, taking on many of the tropes and symbols of girl culture (Dougher & Pecknold, 2016; G. Wald, 1998). This “girly” aesthetic has its roots in the riot grrrl movement of the 1990s, as well as in the work of female

pop and rock performers such as Courtney Love and Gwen Stefani, performers who deliberately adopted the trappings of girlhood in ways which troubled traditional models of femininity (Attwood, 2007; Eileraas, 1997; G. Wald, 1998). This performative girliness was employed by many successful female pop acts during the late 1990s and early 2000s, including the Spice Girls, Destiny's Child and Britney Spears. Today's charts are dominated by a new generation of female pop stars, such as Taylor Swift, Miley Cyrus, Katy Perry and Ariana Grande. These performers embody a stereotypical version of girlhood through their physical appearance, behaviour and mannerisms (Dougher & Pecknold, 2016, p. 408), enacting coquettish, infantilised gestures as part of a stylised performance of hyper-feminine glamour. Their work often employs a light-hearted "fun" aesthetic, focusing on experiences that are considered central to contemporary girlhood, such as female friendships, partying, dancing, romance, first love and heartbreak (Baker, 2001; Chittenden, 2013).

The issue of female power has frequently been addressed in pop music and, since the 1980s, pop music has depicted a youthful, feminised notion of female empowerment, known colloquially as "girl power" (Currie et al., 2009; Gonick, Renold, Ringrose, & Weems, 2009; Harris, 2004a; Taft, 2004; Zaslów, 2009). This idea was promoted enthusiastically by Madonna in the 1980s, and was later adopted by the Spice Girls in the 1990s (Charles, 2014; Dibben, 1999; Fritzsche, 2004; Gauntlett, 2004; Leach, 2001; Lemish, 1998; Whiteley, 2000). The Spice Girls themselves popularised the slogan "girl power", which was originally associated with the riot grrrl movement (Currie et al., 2009, p. 7; Warwick & Adrian, 2016, p. 6). Today's female pop stars embody a similar brand of female empowerment, particularly Beyoncé, who has become a contemporary girl power icon (Hopkins, 2018; Martínez-Jiménez, Gálvez-Muñoz, & Solano-Caballero, 2018; Trier-Bieniek, 2016; Weidhase, 2015). Within popular music, girl power is linked with notions of eroticism, sexual freedom, female independence and sisterhood. This notion of girl power has come to influence popular culture more generally, shaping how girls are portrayed in film, television and literature.

Girl power imagines girlhood as a time of opportunity and potential. The girl power protagonist is independent, driven, ambitious and strong minded, embodying the archetype of the high-achieving, aspirational girl (Currie et al., 2009; Harris, 2004a; McRobbie, 2007). Since the end of the twentieth century, there has been considerable interest in the academic attainment and professional success of "can-do" girls and young women (Harris, 2004a). These media

narratives celebrate the gains of second wave feminism,³ albeit only insofar as they have allowed today's young women to work, delay motherhood, earn money and become financially-independent consumer subjects. The idea of girl power is also closely bound up with the objectification of women. As such, the girl power heroine is typically presented as a sexual object, who is valued primarily for her beauty and sexual appeal (Currie et al., 2009; Dibben, 1999; G. Wald, 1998). Within this model, women are expected to gain power by using their bodies as a form of sexual currency. In a sense, then, girl power is very much a product of the late modern capitalist economy; it presents a depoliticised, individualistic version of commodified feminism which rests on the idea that women should exploit their erotic appeal to gain influence within a patriarchal culture (Gill & Scharff, 2011; McRobbie, 2009; Tasker & Negra, 2007). In response to the growing dominance of this pervasive discourse, scholars have criticised the idea of girl power, calling it "babe feminism" (Henry, 2004, p. 111), "commodity feminism" (Goldman, Heath, & Smith, 1991) and "free market feminism" (McRobbie, 2001). Specifically, scholars have raised doubts about the usefulness of this discourse, questioning whether it can be effectively utilised to achieve female empowerment within a real-world context (Currie et al., 2009; Taft, 2004).

Alongside the rise of girl power, anxiety has grown about the representation of women in the media and the sexualised imagery which now pervades mainstream pop culture (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Tolman, 2002). In recent decades, sexualised imagery (mostly depicting young women) has become prevalent within media aimed at children and, with the rise of new forms of digital technology, this imagery is now more accessible to children than ever before (Bragg & Buckingham, 2009; Buckingham, Willett, Bragg, & Russell, 2010). In particular, sexualised images have become a central feature of girl culture (Kehily, 2012). Popular music, in particular, is dominated by this imagery, and images of submissive, objectified women have become standard fare in music videos. Young female pop stars typically represent the focal point of the controversy surrounding sexualised media content, and former child stars (such as Britney Spears and Miley Cyrus) tend to be singled out for particular criticism for their sexualised performances.

In many ways, this anxiety reflects much wider concerns about young people's engagement with popular music, and popular culture more generally. Aapola et al. (2005) argue that the debate surrounding sexualised media taps into the widely-held view of female adolescence as a

³ The "second wave" of feminism was a period of feminist activism which started in the 1960s and lasted approximately two decades. Second-wave feminism focused on a range of issues, including violence against women, inequality in the workplace, sexuality, reproductive rights and legal inequalities between men and women.

period of crisis, in which girls are particularly vulnerable. The figure of the “at-risk” girl (Harris, 2004a) recalls the stereotype of the passive female fan who receives media messages uncritically, blindly mimicking the behaviour and attitudes of the celebrities she idolises (Driscoll, 2002, p. 186).

These ideas echo the early cultural critiques of the Frankfurt School philosophers. Adorno and Horkheimer, for example, argued that audiences are exploited by a “standardised” mass culture, which limits the ideological possibilities available to individuals (Adorno, 1936/1989–1990, 1941/1990, 1963/1991; Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944/1972). In the second half of the twentieth century, it became somewhat fashionable to denounce the theories of the Frankfurt School as pessimistic (Paddison, 1996, p. 131). Hall’s (1973, 1980) encoding/decoding model of communication went some way towards the deconstruction of this structural analysis, positing that audiences play an active role in the decoding of media messages. Fiske (2010, 2011) later built on this idea, arguing that audiences are made up of distinct individuals, each of whom has a unique, subjective relationship with popular culture. Research into girls’ engagement with popular culture has shown that, like all cultural consumers, girls have a creative, interactive relationship with media texts, and that they are both the recipients *and* the authors of cultural meaning (Baker, 2001; Bloustien, 2003; Chittenden, 2013; Einerson, 1998a, 1998b). To gain a deeper understanding of girls’ engagement with popular music, researchers must therefore develop methods of enquiry that go beyond the reception model, which seeks to investigate how media “affect” or “influence” audiences, focusing instead on how young listeners participate actively in popular music culture (Railton & Watson, 2011, p. 146).

My research addresses this, offering an in-depth analysis of girls’ opinions about music, which takes into account the complex, mutual relationship that girls have with popular culture. Because my work focuses specifically on girlhood, I approach this topic from a gendered perspective, paying particular attention to issues which affect girls. As I have shown, young femininity is constructed around a series of gendered assumptions about the nature of girlhood, and this shapes the way that girls are represented in popular culture. My research considers how girls interpret these representations, investigating how they make sense of dominant media discourses relating to girlhood, gender and power. This relates back to my main research question, which concerns the role of music in the construction of young female identity. By viewing this question from a gendered perspective, I focus specifically on how girls use music to construct gendered (or “feminine”) identities.

1.3 Discourse, power and the construction of identity

In order to gain a nuanced insight into these issues, I position girls' voices at the forefront of my work, concentrating on how girls discuss music in a social context and how they articulate ideas about music. My work focuses principally on discourse, exploring how girls deploy discourse to negotiate gendered identities through their discussion of music.

According to Foucault (1970, 1971, 1972, 1977, 1978), discourses are systems of knowledge and meaning which support and maintain power relations within society, producing ways of being in the world. Discourses are generally articulated through language and practice, offering ways of representing and communicating ideas within a particular historical context (Foucault, 1971, 1972). Consequently, discourse is closely linked with power. Indeed, Foucault (1978) argues that discourse is itself a form of power, since knowledge networks work to maintain systems of power within society; discourse constructs ideas, governing how people think and talk about the world around them. By studying discourse, researchers can gain insight into the ideas which regulate people's lives (Åkerstrøm Andersen, 2003; Burr, 2003; Fairclough, 1992; Hook, 2007; Jäger & Maier, 2009; Kendall & Wickham, 1999). This, in turn, sheds light on the ideological constraints operating within society. By focusing on discourse in my own research, I sought to gain a more thorough understanding of the possibilities that popular music offers to girls, as well as the limitations it imposes on them.

The study of discourse offers a framework for exploring issues of identity, since ideas about identity are expressed through discourse, within the discursive confines of specific social and historical contexts. Throughout my work, I take a post-structuralist view of identity, recognising that identity is constructed through various social and cultural practices. Within the popular sphere, identity is largely taken for granted, and it is widely accepted that all individuals have a unique "self" (Bettie, 2003). In the mid to late twentieth century, philosophers such as Foucault, Derrida and Althusser worked to dismantle the concept of identity, questioning the perceived naturalness of the self (Bellou, 2013; Mansfield, 2000; Strozier, 2002). Current scholarship maintains that identity is constructed through an individual's habitual repetition of certain behaviours which, taken together, create the impression of a stable self. This is perhaps best understood using Butler's (1990) notion of "performativity", which she discusses in her influential work *Gender Trouble*. Although Butler's discussion of performativity relates specifically to the construction of gendered identities, her ideas can also be applied to the concept of identity more generally. Butler argues that gendered identities are produced through performativity, a process which involves the enactment of "a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a

natural sort of being” (pp. 43–44). According to Butler, identity is a social phenomenon which is realised through the negotiation of discourse within a social context, and it is through this process that individuals experience the sense of having a true self (Belsey, 2002; Bettie, 2003; Currie et al., 2009; Flax, 1990). I maintain this critical approach throughout my work, using the term “identity” to refer to the *phenomenon* of identity, as it is conceptualised by people in their day-to-day lives.

I also refer to the concept of subjectivity throughout my work, distinguishing between identity (the discursive construction of selfhood) and subjectivity (an individual’s lived experience of being in the world). I draw this distinction intentionally, in order to critically examine how individuals experience a sense of self, and how these experiences are shaped by systems of power. Weedon (1987) defines subjectivity as “the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world” (p. 32). In his work on subjectivity and the self, Foucault (1982) argues that the subject is both a product *and* a producer of power; in other words, the subject is realised through discourse, whilst also creating discourse. Specifically, subjectivity is constructed through the negotiation of unequal power relations, and through experiences of domination and subordination (Mansfield, 2000, p. 52).

To investigate how and why people think, act and interact in certain ways, I refer to positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990; Van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). Positioning theory posits that various subject positions are afforded within a given context, and that these positions may be “offered, accepted, claimed or resisted” (Burr, 2003, p. 114).

Once we take up a subject position in discourse, we have available to us a particular, limited set of concepts, images, metaphors, ways of speaking, self-narratives and so on that we take on as our own ... Our sense of who we are and what it is therefore possible and not possible for us to do, what it is right and appropriate for us to do, and what it is wrong and inappropriate for us to do thus all derive from our occupation of subject positions within discourse. (Burr, 2003, pp. 119–120)

The subject is constituted through the act of positioning (M. L. Adams, 1997, pp. 15–16; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 111). By taking up positions, individuals align themselves with certain beliefs and values (Hall, 1995, 1996). In turn, this process reinforces these values; for example, by enacting stereotypically gendered behaviours, individuals reproduce patriarchal values, thereby perpetuating the system of patriarchy within wider society. Foucault argues that individuals take up subject positions through their use of discourse (McHoul & Grace, 1993). The ability of individuals to take up subject positions is constrained by the conditions of the

surrounding social context, and, in general, people are only able to adopt positions that are available to them within that particular context (Dillabough, 2004, p. 489).

Positioning theory is particularly relevant to the study of cultural works, and has been used to explore how audiences interpret the meaning of texts. Notably, the idea of positioning recalls Gibson's (1966, 1986) theory of affordances, which has been applied within a range of different disciplines, including musicology, music sociology, celebrity studies, theatre studies, film studies and television studies. The term "affordance" refers to the potential uses of an object, which are limited by its properties.

When the constant properties of constant objects are perceived (the shape, size, color, texture, composition, motion, animation, and position relative to other objects), the observer can go on to detect their *affordances* ... I mean simply what things furnish, for good or ill. What they *afford* the observer, after all, depends on their properties. (Gibson, 1966, p. 285)

Although Gibson (1966) refers here to physical objects, the same idea can also be applied to cultural works; just as objects afford certain practical uses, cultural texts afford potential meanings which can be taken up, resisted or subverted by the reader.

Within music studies, scholars such as Clarke (2005, 2010), DeNora (2000), Godøy (2010) and De Souza (2017) have made use of this idea, exploring how music offers listeners various affordances. Music's capacity to produce affordances is constrained by both its material (or sonic) characteristics and its extraneous cultural associations (Clarke, 2005; N. Cook, 2001; Dibben, 1999, 2006; Kramer, 2011). By taking up (and resisting) certain affordances, individuals are able to occupy subject positions. Clarke (2005) notes that affordance theory represents a middle ground between "the idea that perceivers construct their own utterly individual and unpredictable meanings from an aesthetic object" and "the idea that meaning is entirely contained within the objective structures of the work itself" (p. 93). Like Clarke, I use both affordance theory and positioning theory to maintain a balance between these two opposing perspectives, recognising that, while individuals draw their own subjective meanings from musical works, the range of meanings available to them is limited by the music's properties. I apply these principles throughout my research to investigate how girls construct identities, considering how they take up music's affordances, and how they use music as a resource for positioning. In doing so, my work explores the range of subject positions available to girls, and how they negotiate these subjectivities in their daily lives.

1.4 Valuing popular music

As explained earlier in this chapter, musical taste plays a role in the construction and performance of identity. To explore taste, I pay particular attention to discourses of value, investigating how girls evaluate music, and how they express musical judgements. This issue is particularly pertinent to the study of young female audiences, given that girls are typically characterised as undiscerning listeners who are unable to make sophisticated musical judgements. How, then, do girls, an audience typically assumed to have bad taste, make judgements about popular music? Furthermore, how do they understand value within mainstream pop music, a genre typically assumed to have little value? In this thesis, I consider these questions, in order to explore how issues of musical taste and value relate to identity. Studying musical value offers a new and original way to address my main research question, providing a novel framework to investigate the construction of identity.

The issue of musical value plays a central role within popular music culture. Ideas of value are firmly embedded within the language of popular culture, and are rooted in value-laden terms such as “good”, “bad”, “cool” and “rubbish”. Within the music and entertainment industries, the evaluation of music is an institutionalised practice and, for music critics and journalists, critical judgement is itself a form of creative expression (Frith, 1996, pp. 16–17). Judgements about music form the basis of popular musical events such as “battle of the bands” competitions and talent contests – audition-style performances which present the act of judgement as a form of entertainment in its own right. Despite popular music’s status as a form of “low” culture, hierarchies of value operate *within* this category, and these hierarchies serve to distinguish between different styles of popular music (Frith, 1996, 2004; Thornton, 1995).

However, while the issue of value remains hugely significant to popular musicians, critics and fans, music scholarship has moved away from this idea, taking a more critical approach to notions of musical value and authenticity (Gracyk, 1999, 2007; Middleton, 2006). This reflects a wider disciplinary shift, following the New Musicology movement of the 1980s and 1990s. New Musicology challenged prevailing academic beliefs about musical value, proposing alternatives to the aestheticism of traditional musicology (Kerman, 1985; Kramer, 1990, 1995; McClary, 2000; Subotnik, 1991, 1996). New Musicology also expanded the focus of music studies to include styles of music from beyond the “art” music canon, drawing on disciplines including women’s studies, postcolonial studies and queer theory (McClary, 1991; Solie, 1993). Proponents of New Musicology argued that ideas of musical value are constructed, reflecting wider ideological discourses operating within the culture (Leppert & McClary, 1987; McClary, 1991, 2000).

Since the 1980s, scholars have adopted a more sociological approach to the study of music, focusing on how audiences engage with music in a real-world context. In particular, audience research has been heavily influenced by the work of Bourdieu, and his seminal text *Distinction* (1984). In *Distinction*, Bourdieu suggests that taste is primarily a social issue, rather than an aesthetic one. Bourdieu argues that, by making judgements of taste, individuals accumulate “cultural capital”, the capital (or value) which arises from the acquisition and expression of cultural knowledge (Bourdieu, 1986). In order to accumulate cultural capital, individuals must learn to apply cultural knowledge in specific socially-coded ways, enacting behaviours which communicate prestige – as Thornton (1995) states, individuals must create the impression of being “in the know” (p. 27). Put simply, cultural capital is not just something people *have*, it is also something people *do*. In this way, cultural judgements perpetuate the stratification of society; the notion of “good taste” has historically been associated with educational and economic privilege (Bourdieu, 1984), and some forms of “high” culture, such as classical music, are still primarily the preserve of the most highly-educated in society (Mike Savage, 2006).

Drawing on this radical approach, cultural theorists such as Hebdige (1979) and Fiske (1992, 2010, 2011) began to study popular music (and popular culture more generally) as a social phenomenon, focusing on the symbolic, rather than the aesthetic, value of music. In the past three decades, scholars including Lewis (1990, 1992), Cavicchi (1998), Doss (1999), R. G. Adams and Sardiello (2000) and Vroomen (2004) have also contributed to this body of work, conducting empirical research to investigate popular music audiences, fandoms and subcultures.

This approach to audience studies represents a valuable contribution to the broader field of popular musicology, situating popular music within its social and historical context. However, by treating music first and foremost as a *social* phenomenon, it leaves certain questions unanswered. If musical judgements are primarily a social matter, does this then mean that popular music has little aesthetic content, or that listeners’ experiences of aesthetic appreciation are merely illusory?

The reliance on sociological approaches within popular musicology has led to a methodological gulf between the study of popular music and the study of art music. On one hand, popular music tends to be studied from a “social” perspective, often involving empirical methods which place the audience at the centre of enquiry. Art music, on the other hand, tends to be studied from an “aesthetic” perspective, involving text-based analytical methods which focus primarily on the material properties of the music and the perceived “autonomous” value of the music (Clarke, 2005; Goehr, 1992). By overlooking the issue of aesthetic value, popular musicologists

inadvertently reinforce the very assumption that they typically seek to challenge: the idea that art music is more valuable than popular music. Moreover, by focusing chiefly on popular music's social meanings, scholars ignore the aesthetic pleasure that listeners derive from popular music (Frith, 1996; Gracyk, 1999).

Scholars of popular music, such as Frith (1996) and Gracyk (1999), have attempted to address the issue of musical value, calling for a return to the study of the aesthetics of popular music, albeit from a critical perspective which acknowledges the constructedness of musical values and the role of the audience in the interpretation of musical meaning. Both Frith and Gracyk challenge the notion that audiences value popular music primarily for its social function, or for its ability to signify an allegiance to certain political ideals. Instead, Gracyk argues that popular audiences *are* in fact interested in the "sensuous display" (p. 209) of musical content, and that musical judgements are often based on opinions about the sonic properties of music. In this sense, popular music *is* experienced as an aesthetic phenomenon; it stirs a deeply-felt, affective response in listeners, which is experienced as a seemingly instinctive reaction to the music. As DeNora (2000) explains:

Music's powers extend beyond its capacity to serve as a paradigm. Its temporal dimension, the fact that it is a non-verbal, non-depictive medium, and that it is a physical presence whose vibrations can be felt, all enhance its ability to work at non-cognitive or subconscious levels ... we do not turn to music as a resource but are rather caught up in it, find ourselves in the middle of it, are awakened by it. (p. 159)

Frith (1996) argues that this response precedes the expression of musical judgement through discourse, suggesting that this process serves to explain and justify the listener's initial, visceral reaction to the music. For Frith, musical judgements are, at least in part, a rational, discursive process, "based in reason, evidence, persuasion" (p. 4).

For musical judgements to make sense, people must broadly be in agreement about what constitutes "good" and "bad" music (Frith, 1996; Van der Merwe, 1989). As such, musical judgements rely on the existence of a shared set of values (Frith, 1996; Gracyk, 1999). These values do not exist in a vacuum; rather, they reflect the social and cultural conventions of the wider context. By studying how audiences value music, researchers can therefore gain an insight into the broader ideological discourses which govern how people think, behave and interact within society.

Alongside the broader issue of identity, this study explores ideas of musical value, considering *how* and *why* girls make musical judgements, and how these judgements contribute to an overall

sense of musical taste.⁴ My research offers an in-depth analysis of the processes involved in musical judgements, focusing on how girls talk about music and the discourses of value they use in their taste distinctions. In short, my research explores what musical judgements *do* for girls. This helps to shed light on my primary research question, showing *how* girls use music to construct identities.

1.5 An overview of the thesis

In this introductory chapter, I have presented my main research question and the key objectives of my work. I have also provided an overview of the theoretical context surrounding my research, outlining relevant work in this area and key scholarly debates surrounding the study of girlhood and popular music. In addition, I have identified relevant issues which my research will address (including gender, power, musical taste and musical value) and key theoretical frameworks that I will use in my research (such as post-structuralist discourse theory, positioning theory and affordance theory).

This introductory chapter is followed by a chapter summarising my methodology, in which I explain how I carried out my research and the methods I used to analyse my data. The next chapter introduces my research participants, describing their listening habits and their engagement with popular culture. This provides context for my analysis, which explores the themes that emerged from my participants' discussions during the course of my research, with each chapter focusing on one specific theme. I begin my analysis by exploring the discourses of value employed by the girls, paying close attention to issues of gender, identity and power. I then focus on how the girls applied these values in a social context, examining the role of music in their peer groups. The concluding chapter summarises my findings, returning to my initial research question and the issue of identity. Finally, I critically evaluate my study, considering how my research could be taken further, and how it could be used to improve the lives of girls.

⁴ I use the word “judgement” to refer to the act of making musical distinctions, and the word “taste” to refer to the overall impression of a person’s likes and dislikes (taste is usually understood and experienced as a stable phenomenon, which maintains a degree of continuity over the life course).

2 Methodology

This chapter explores the methodological ideas underlying my research. In it, I describe my experiences of conducting empirical research with young female participants, providing a detailed overview of my population sample. I also consider my positionality as researcher, explaining how I presented myself during the data-collection process and how I built relationships with my participants. Finally, I detail the analytical methods that I used to interpret my data.

2.1 The benefits of qualitative methods

I chose to employ a qualitative methodology to address my research questions. This approach proved useful, given the nature of my research, which focuses on music as a social phenomenon. As Cohen (1993) notes, qualitative methods offer a solution to the problem of studying “beliefs, values, rituals and general patterns of behaviour underlying social relationships or networks” (p. 123). Qualitative methods provide a nuanced and sensitive framework for understanding the social world, allowing for a broad range of ideas and experiences to be studied:

Through qualitative research we can explore a wide array of dimensions of the social world, including the texture and weave of everyday life, the understandings, experiences and imaginings of our research participants, the ways that social processes, institutions, discourses or relationships work, and the significance of the meanings that they generate. (Mason, 2002, p. 1)

For this reason, qualitative methods are now commonly used by researchers to explore how individuals engage with cultural works, including music, film and literature. These methods offer an alternative to the text-based analytical methods which, until recently, dominated the cultural disciplines. Qualitative methods were taken up enthusiastically by audience researchers in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Notably, the cultural scholars of the Birmingham School used qualitative methods to investigate the impact of mass culture on the lives of young people (Hall & Jefferson, 2006; McRobbie, 1978; Willis, 1978). These researchers used a combination of discussion-based methods (such as interviews) and observational methods (such as ethnography) to gain first-hand insight into youth subcultures, social groups and fan communities.

Following the emergence of empirical musicology in the 1990s and early 2000s, musicologists began to rely increasingly on qualitative methods as a means to investigate how people engage with music. By adopting a practical approach based on observation and participation, empirical researchers sought to liberate musicology from the text-based methods favoured by the new musicologists of the 1980s and 1990s, and the traditional musicologists before them (Clarke & Cook, 2004; N. Cook & Everist, 1999; DeNora, 2000; P. J. Martin, 1995, 2006). Qualitative methods gave music researchers the tools to study music as a social phenomenon operating within a real-world context, providing methods to study how music is “made, used, and responded to within specific contexts and settings” (DeNora, 2004, p. 52).

Qualitative methods have been particularly influential within popular music studies. Since popular music is a relatively young discipline (Tagg, 1982), scholars have had to develop new methods to study a form of music that was historically excluded from the academy (Moore, 2003). As Grazian (2004a) notes, qualitative, participant-focused methods offer a “bounty of opportunities” (p. 206) for popular music researchers. Cohen (1993) argues that, by using methods such as ethnography, researchers may counter the journalistic, textual and statistical approaches which dominate popular music studies (p. 123).

Qualitative research is often characterised as an “ethical” form of research (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997; Sandelowski, 2002). To an extent, this belief relates to the *type* of data that is produced during qualitative research. Discussion-based qualitative methods (such as interviews) generate discursive, textual data (Flick, 2007; Saldaña, 2011, p. 3), and this allows the researcher to capture a broad range of meaning and expression. Since power is negotiated and embodied through discourse (Foucault, 1978; McHoul & Grace, 1993), researchers may use qualitative methods to observe how individuals use discourse to take up positions of power within a social context (Currie et al., 2009). Furthermore, qualitative methods offer scholars the tools to interrogate and critique systems of power, exploring how these systems act on people’s lives.

Qualitative methods place the research subject at the centre of enquiry, focusing on the thoughts, opinions and experiences of participants. Kvale (1996) notes that qualitative researchers seek to understand the social realm “from the actors’ own perspectives, describing the world as experienced by the subjects, and with the assumption that the important reality is what people perceive it to be” (p. 52). Because of this, qualitative methods are often used in research with marginalised populations, since it is assumed that these methods can be used to “empower” or “give voice to” people who do not usually have the opportunity to tell their own stories (C. S. Davis, 2008).

These assumptions should be treated with caution by researchers investigating the lives of marginalised people (Atkinson, 1997; Sandelowski, 2002). In particular, the idea that qualitative researchers “give voice to” their participants should be interrogated (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997; Lykes & Hershberg, 2012). Qualitative researchers should bear in mind the ways in which qualitative data are constantly mediated, interpreted and re-interpreted during the research process. Because of this, participants’ responses should never be treated as an “accurate” depiction of reality; rather, they should be viewed as one particular rendering of reality, expressed through the medium of language within a specific social context (such as an interview setting). Many factors influence how individuals articulate their experiences, including their command of language and their ability to express themselves, as well as any biases, beliefs and attitudes they may hold. This data is then filtered through the lens of the researcher, who offers an authoritative, “expert” interpretation of it. As such, qualitative research is always politically-charged, and should therefore never be seen as neutral (Mason, 2002, p. 8). This need not necessarily be seen as a disadvantage by researchers; instead, the inherently political nature of qualitative research can be viewed as a unique and valuable asset, which offers researchers the opportunity to critique, challenge and undermine taken-for-granted ideas and beliefs.

Because of this, qualitative methods have been enthusiastically adopted by feminist researchers seeking to challenge structural inequalities between men and women (Järviluoma, Moisala, & Vilkkko, 2003; Oakley, 2000). Feminist scholars first began using qualitative methods in the 1970s and 1980s, as a way to challenge positivist thinking within the academy and counter the scholarly reliance on quantitative, statistical methods. To investigate women’s beliefs and experiences, feminist researchers developed nuanced qualitative methods which, they argued, were better suited to the study of women’s lives (Järviluoma et al., 2003).

Qualitative feminist research places a spotlight on women’s discourse, using qualitative methods to capture and interpret women’s talk within a nuanced framework of analysis. Since men’s voices are more frequently heard than women’s, men’s talk is often assumed to represent “normal” discourse (Kvale, 1996, p. 73). Qualitative research offers a critical approach to discourse analysis which recognises the gendered differences between men’s and women’s talk, acknowledging that women’s expression is constrained within a patriarchal context. By giving women and girls a chance to tell their stories, qualitative research offers feminist scholars an opportunity to gain insight into the female experience, redressing scholarship’s historic gender imbalance. As Lather (1991) argues, “the overt ideological goal of feminist research in the human sciences is to correct both the *invisibility* and *distortion* of female experience in ways relevant to ending women’s unequal social position” (p. 71).

For the reasons detailed above, qualitative methods were particularly suitable for my own research, since my research seeks to shed light on girls' subjective beliefs about music, exploring their experiences of musical engagement, their musical memories and the stories that they tell about music. Since the 1990s, scholars have argued that girls represent a uniquely disempowered group, since they must negotiate the difficulties of growing up female within a "girl-poisoning culture" (Pipher, 1994, p. xiii), as well as the normal struggles of adolescence (L. M. Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Gilligan et al., 1990; Tolman, 2002). In order to represent this group fairly and sensitively, I conducted my research from a feminist standpoint (Harding, 2004; Hill Collins, 2000; Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002; D. E. Smith, 1987), devising a participant-focused qualitative methodology. This offered my participants a space to share their ideas and experiences from their own perspectives, placing their voices at the centre of my work.

2.2 Designing the study

When designing my study, I first had to define my population group, deciding who I would recruit to take part in the research. As stated in the introductory chapter, my research examines female adolescence as a period of transition, recognising that it is culturally constructed as a precarious phase in which identity is formed. Because of this, I sought to gain an insight into the experiences of girls who are on the cusp of adolescence, who exist somewhere between the slippery and contested categories of childhood, "tween-hood", teen girlhood and young womanhood.

In order to do this, I recruited girls between the ages of 10 and 13 to take part in the research, since this age range encapsulates this idea of change and transition. While girls at the lower end of this age bracket may still be considered children, girls at the upper end may be starting to be seen as teenage girls or young women. This is due to a number of factors which vary considerably from person to person. For example, physical changes may make some girls appear more adult, while some may still appear very young. Social milestones are also extremely important; perhaps most significantly, the move from primary to secondary school is seen as an important rite of passage, during which children are thrown into a new, and often threatening, adolescent world. By focusing on this age range, I sought to capture this pivotal moment of change in girls' lives, gathering data from a diverse range of participants at various different stages of this culturally meaningful phase.

To design an appropriate methodology, I tailored my research methods to the requirements of my study, taking inspiration from qualitative researchers working in similar fields. I chose to use two discussion-based methods: focus groups and interviews. By combining these methods, I was able to capture a range of responses, making for a diverse and interesting data set.

These methods were particularly appropriate to my study, given my focus on discourse. Both focus groups and interviews capture the depth and nuance of speech, and they can therefore be used to generate rich qualitative data. Consequently, they are more suitable to my own research than other qualitative methods, such as biographical, practice-based and ethnographic methods (e.g. written, video or photo diaries, or participant observation and field notes). These methods arguably offer limited possibilities in research with children, who may struggle to express themselves through written language, or through creative, media-based activities (such as creating a film or artwork). Furthermore, researchers who choose to observe children's interactions are subject to various practical and ethical constraints, which may inhibit their ability to collect useful data. By using spoken dialogue and social interaction to gather discursive data, focus groups and interviews offer a way to gain an in-depth insight into children's beliefs and values. The responses elicited by these methods are also more immediate and spontaneous than the more considered information recorded in diaries. Furthermore, focus groups and interviews are very practical, efficient methods, since they generate a wealth of data in a very short period of time. Focus groups, in particular, offer an opportunity to include many participants, and this can help researchers to capture a broader range of ideas. This can add breadth to qualitative research, which often uses relatively small population samples.

I chose to conduct focus groups because I wanted to explore the role of music in girls' social lives, investigating how they discuss music amongst their peers. During early adolescence, young people often begin to value their peer groups more highly, as they start to break away from the family unit, becoming more independent (K. A. Martin, 1996, p. 11). Popular music plays an important role within peer groups, since music is often experienced as a social phenomenon; it is typically encountered in social scenarios (such as parties, informal get-togethers, celebrations and live music events), and discussions about music are an important feature of social interactions (Frith, 1996). As such, focus groups provide a naturalistic environment in which to observe how young people discuss music, and many scholars have used this method to investigate children's engagement with music (Lemish, 1998; Lowe, 2004; Richards, 1998; C. Williams, 2001). By using focus groups, I sought to capture the everyday "chat" which occurs in girl groups, and all of the laughter, joking, tension, conflict and cooperation that this entails. I also chose to use focus groups because they facilitate a form of "retrospective introspection" (Merton & Kendall, 1946); during the course of my research, I

wanted my participants to reflect on their beliefs, interrogating assumptions which normally go unchallenged and unarticulated (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2001, pp. 5–6).

There were also a number of practical reasons for using focus groups. Firstly, they offered a useful way to introduce the study to the participants and get them thinking about popular music; taking part in a group discussion is generally considered to be less intimidating than taking part in a one-to-one interview, since interviews tend to require more thought, effort and commitment from participants. Secondly, the focus groups provided an opportunity for me to get to know my participants and to become accustomed to the way they interacted with one another. Thirdly, they helped me to obtain a broad overview of the participants' musical tastes and opinions, something which proved extremely useful when I came to interview the girls individually.

The data collected in the interviews complemented the focus group data, fleshing out the girls' discussions and building on ideas that had previously been mentioned in passing. Whereas focus groups tend to generate more fragmented, superficial responses, interviews generally elicit more thoughtful, in-depth responses from participants.

Conducting interviews also helped me to create a safe and constructive environment in which my participants could express themselves confidently, without having to worry about the opinions of their peers. This allowed me to address the key drawback of focus group research: that people are often uncomfortable expressing their opinions in groups. During qualitative research, it is vital for researchers to develop and maintain a positive and trusting relationship with their research subjects (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010, pp. 25–26), and this is particularly important in research with children (Christensen & James, 2008, p. 7; Pattman & Kehily, 2004, p. 134). Girls, in particular, tend to become self-conscious during adolescence, and as a result they are often less willing to express themselves in groups (Orenstein, 1994). This may relate to the problematic interactions which sometimes occur within girl groups; conformity is generally considered very important within girls' friendship groups, and girls who do not conform to group norms are often bullied or ostracised (V. Griffiths, 1995, pp. 74–97). Musical taste is also felt by many to be a uniquely personal and revealing topic (Frith, 1996), and people of all ages are often reticent to discuss their tastes in social situations, particularly when they feel that their musical preferences may be interpreted as unusual or different. This is borne out by the work of other scholars who have used focus groups to investigate musical taste; for example, Richards (1998) found that even adult participants are sometimes reluctant to discuss their musical tastes in groups (p. 146). To address this problem, interviews have been used by researchers to get young participants to “open up” about their tastes (Einerson, 1998a; Koizumi, 2002).

Participants are often more candid in interviews, since people are generally more open with new

acquaintances than they are with people they already know, particularly when the acquaintance is an outsider who will only be in their lives temporarily.

Furthermore, interviews provide a useful way to generate excitement and enthusiasm amongst participants, since people are often very keen to be interviewed. This is particularly true of participants from disempowered or marginalised groups, who may rarely get the chance to share their opinions and have their voices heard. Interviews represent a highly-valued method of enquiry which is culturally associated with fame and prestige, and interviewees are generally assumed to be important and worthy of interest (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 47). Consequently, researchers who conduct interviews with children often find that their participants are extremely eager to take part. Einerson (1998a), for example, found that recruiting girls to take part in her participatory study was surprisingly easy, since the girls were so keen to be interviewed (p. 45).

2.3 Conducting the research

This section documents the research process in detail, describing how I carried out my research activities and the circumstances in which they took place. The research took place at two Guide units and two schools: Upper Woodvale Guides, St Hilda's Guides, Trinity High School and Burnside Hill Academy.⁵ It was carried out with ethics permission from the Department of Music at the University of Sheffield. The research process differed slightly in each of the four settings, depending on the wishes of the Guide leaders and teachers who were involved in the research (for example, the activities were sometimes conducted in a slightly different order). In general, however, the same process was carried out in each of the four settings.

I felt that it was important to carry out my research in more than one different setting, so that I could include a more diverse population sample. By recruiting participants from different geographical regions, I was able to include a range of perspectives, incorporating the views of girls from many different backgrounds. The decision to conduct the research at both schools and Guide units was also a conscious one. Conducting research in schools offered a convenient way to recruit young participants to my study. The schools that hosted the research were keen to get involved in the study and they seemed accustomed to taking part in projects with external partners and institutions. At the schools, the research was carried out with the help of music teachers and was conducted during music lessons. However, in order to gain a different perspective, I also wanted to conduct the research in a non-academic, non-subject specific

⁵ The names of the Guide units and schools have been changed.

environment. The Guides offered a more informal environment for the research. Guides is an activity which takes place outside school, and it is typically associated with leisure, fun and socialising; as stated on the Guide Association's website, the aim of the Guides is to provide a space where girls can "learn skills, grow in confidence, make lifelong friendships, help their communities and have lots of fun" (Girlguiding, n.d., para. 4).⁶ As such, the Guides offered an alternative research environment which was very different from the schools.

My first task was to contact gatekeepers at Guide units and schools, providing a brief overview of my research and the planned activities. I then arranged introductory meetings with those who expressed an interest in taking part. These meetings provided an opportunity to explain my research in more depth, discuss relevant practicalities (such as where and when the activities would take place) and distribute information sheets and consent forms. Overall, these meetings were useful and informative; not only did they offer a chance to get to know the gatekeepers, they also provided an opportunity to gain a preliminary overview of the girls' musical tastes. Most of the gatekeepers had a broad knowledge of pop music, and they generally knew which bands and artists were currently popular with young people. Some of them had previously organised their own music-related activities with the children in their care; for example, the Upper Woodvale Guide leaders had recently taken their unit to a music festival and activity weekend run by Girlguiding UK, featuring performances by several moderately well-known pop acts.

Following these meetings, the gatekeepers informed the girls and their parents about the research, distributing information sheets and consent forms to them. The girls who returned completed consent forms were then invited to take part in the project. In order to introduce myself and my research to the participants, I was given an opportunity to meet with them. At the Guide units, this meeting took the form of a short informal presentation to all of the girls, whereas at the schools I addressed the girls in smaller groups prior to the research activities. During these discussions, I explained my research in simple terms, using language that the girls could understand. Most importantly, I explained to the girls that it was their choice whether or not they participated in the project, that they were not obliged to take part and that they could opt out at any time. By doing so, I was able to ensure that the participants fully understood the research and the implications of taking part. I was also able to ensure that those who chose to

⁶ The Guide Association was established in the UK in 1909. Girl Guiding soon became a global movement, and in 1928 the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGGS) was established. The Guide Association is now a registered charity, which operates under the name Girlguiding. The organisation is divided into sections, based on age: Rainbows (5–7), Brownies (7–10), Guides (10–14) and Rangers (14–18). My research took place at the Guides, because of the age of the girls who attend this section.

participate did so freely and voluntarily, demonstrating informed consent throughout the process. These discussions were a mutual process, and the girls were encouraged to ask their own questions, so that they could gain a proper understanding of the research.

Because of the age of the participants, I felt it was important to make sure that the girls were constantly aware that their participation was voluntary, and that they had the right to withdraw at any time. To remind them of this, I made sure that I (and the gatekeepers) reiterated this message frequently. This information was communicated to the participants at the start of the focus groups and interviews, when they were also given another opportunity to ask questions. During these discussions, I showed the girls the audio recorder that I would be using to record the discussions and explained how I would be using it. I also stressed that the focus groups and interviews were intended to be casual, relaxed discussions (or “chats”) rather than formal interviews with a clear structure and a fixed set of questions. In general, the participants were enthusiastic about taking part, and many of them were excited about sharing their opinions and having their voices recorded.

At both of the Guide units, I organised a creative poster-making session, which took place prior to the focus groups and interviews. The Guide leaders helped with the organisation and supervision of these sessions, which lasted the duration of a meeting. During these sessions, I asked the participants to make collage-style posters about pop music using sugar paper, felt-tip pens and pictures taken from music magazines. I drew inspiration for this activity from Richards’s (1998) account of running a similar session at a school, which involved participants designing their own publicity material for an imaginary pop star.

It was relatively easy to organise these sessions at the Guides, since activities like this take place frequently at Guide meetings. Consequently, the Guide leaders were used to running similar activity sessions, and the girls seemed accustomed to participating in them. For practical reasons, it was not possible to run these sessions at the schools, since the teachers felt it would not be feasible. Schools are under considerable pressure to utilise lesson time effectively, and this might explain why the teachers were unwilling to devote time to an activity which did not directly relate to the school curriculum.

Although it was specified that the girls’ posters should focus on music, the activity was very open and flexible. Some chose to make posters idolising stars they admired, while others chose to mock stars they disliked. They did this by defacing pictures of these stars – for example, by adding devil horns, moustaches and pointed teeth. They also annotated their posters with written comments expressing their opinions, and symbols such as hearts, stars and emoji-style faces.

Overall, this activity encouraged the participants to start thinking and talking about popular music, offering a way in to the project. It also offered an opportunity for me to get to know the participants in a fun and informal context. Consequently, I used these sessions as an introductory “ice-breaker” activity rather than as a method of data collection. Given my focus on discourse, the focus groups and interviews offered a far more productive way to generate rich qualitative data which could be interpreted through discourse analysis.

In total, my research involved 53 participants, and I conducted 12 focus groups and 20 interviews. These activities took place during Guide meetings and school music lessons. To ensure that the gatekeepers were always close by, the focus groups and interviews were conducted in rooms near to the relevant classroom (at the schools) or church hall (at the Guides); for example, at the Upper Woodvale Guides the interviews were conducted in a side room adjoining the church hall where the Guides met, whereas at Trinity High School they took place in an office adjoining the music room. The discussions were recorded using a small portable audio recorder. This device was clearly visible to the participants at all times and they were alerted each time it was switched on or off.

The duration of the focus groups and interviews varied considerably depending on a number of factors. Sometimes they ended for practical reasons; for example, they often took place during Guide meetings and school lunch hours or lessons, and this meant that they had to end at a specific time (e.g. the end of the lesson). Because of the age of my participants, I let them decide when they would like to end the discussions. Conducting research with children is very different from conducting research with adult participants, since some children may not wish to (or may not be able to) concentrate on a conversation for as long as an adult participant might. Consequently, I felt that it was important to be mindful of the girls’ expectations of the research activities, and to be aware of any signs that they might be ready to leave. For example, some of the participants started to fidget and become distracted when they were ready to end their discussions. In other instances, the discussions came to a natural conclusion, or the girls simply stated that they could not think of anything else to add. The longest focus group lasted for 53:01 minutes, while the shortest lasted 22:24 minutes, and the average length of a focus group was 41:03 minutes. In general, the interviews were shorter, with the longest lasting 38:08 minutes, and the shortest lasting for just 7:39 minutes. This interview was, however, an exception; most were at least 18 minutes long and the average length of an interview was 19:36 minutes.

The focus groups took place prior to the interviews. The groups themselves were put together by the gatekeepers. To do this, they asked for volunteers, selecting four to six girls who wanted to take part. Interviewees were then recruited from this cohort. To do this, I explained the

interview process in detail at the end of each focus group, inviting the girls to take part. I was careful to provide them with sufficient information to make an informed decision, and I made it clear that taking part in an interview was not compulsory. Those who expressed an interest in being interviewed were invited to attend an interview at another time.

Both the focus groups and interviews were conducted in an informal conversational style, and they did not follow a strict structure or plan. Instead, I let the girls take control of the discussions. Most importantly, I wanted them to feel relaxed and comfortable so that I could capture their discussions in as naturalistic a setting as possible. To achieve this, I let the conversations “flow”, letting the girls take control of the discussions and trying not to dictate what they talked about. When I did ask questions, I made sure that they were broad and open-ended, such as “what music do you like/dislike?” The following extract from a focus group demonstrates this, showing how I used a “chatty” conversational style to get the girls talking about music, asking open questions which allowed them to take the conversation where they wanted.

Bridget: So what bands do you like? And what sort of ...

Daisy:⁷ I’ve got ... erm, I like 5 Seconds of Summer and I like The Vamps. And I like The Wanted.

Erin: I like One Direction. Erm, I like Ed Sheeran. And I like Katy Perry and I like Jessie J, and I’ve seen some of them in concert.

Bridget: Oh.

Erin: And I’m gonna see Ed Sheeran at the weekend.

Bridget: Cool, yeah.

Erin: I’m so excited.

Imogen: Same. Erm, I don’t really like bands, I only like solo artists like Jessie J or Adele, I don’t really like bands.

Bridget: Yeah.

There were times, during the research, when I needed to actively stimulate discussion, and I did this by asking more direct questions, such as “who is your favourite performer?” The following extract demonstrates my use of direct questions, showing how I used them to generate discussion and find out more about the girls’ tastes.

⁷ All of the participants’ names have been changed. In addition, the names of people known to the participants have also been changed, since they sometimes mentioned friends, acquaintances, relatives and teachers in their discussions.

Bridget: Do you have like a favourite performer or anything? Like, a favourite band?

Lauren: Alex Turner. I love him (laughs).

Jenny: My favourite band are Fall Out Boy.

Lauren: (Pointing at pictures of performers that she had brought to the focus group)
These and them, except them. So Green Day ...

Nora: 5SOS.

Lauren: ... and Blink-182 and Arctic Monkeys and 5SOS, 'cause they're beautiful.

Jenny: I also like My Chemical Romance.

Nora: That's 5 Seconds of Summer, for anyone who doesn't know.

To probe deeper, I sometimes asked the girls to elaborate on their responses, for example, by asking them to explain why they liked or disliked a certain group, performer, video or song. These questions often led the girls to expand on their initial responses, explaining their judgements in more depth. The following extract from a focus group shows how I got the participants to explain their judgements and opinions. This extract shows how, having been told by some of the girls that they "hated" One Direction, I used direct questioning to get them to explain *why* they disliked the group so much.

Amelia: The only bands I'd like was probably ... The Vamps or 5 Seconds of Summer.
And I *hate* One Direction.

Imogen: Yeah, same.

Amelia: I find them really annoying.

Erin: Oh, I like them!

Bridget: (To Amelia and Imogen) Why? Why do you hate them?

Imogen: They're just ...

Daisy: They're really annoying!

Amelia: Because I think they're just a typical band, and they're just ... I think ...

Imogen: And then they just get so annoying, 'cause, like, all the girls like them and their songs aren't actually that good.

Amelia: I feel they're a bit fake because ... they don't really surprise you, they're just the same, like, Barbie Doll, er, singing group.

Imogen: Yeah.

Bridget: Yeah.

Imogen: They're quite old, they don't bring anything, like, new out. Like, they might have the same beat to the music or something and stuff.

Amelia: And I don't really like the way they sing, I think their voices annoy me sometimes (laughs).

The girls' explanations were often rich and thought-provoking, and they touched on many interesting themes which I was keen to explore further. Sometimes, I chose to steer the girls' conversations, picking up on some of these themes in order to gain a deeper insight into the ideas and beliefs underlying them. To do this, I focused in on specific points made by the girls, asking them to talk more about these ideas. This technique is demonstrated in the following extract from my interview with Erin. Here, Erin discusses the music video for Katy Perry's song "Roar", describing it as "fake". I was particularly interested in her use of this word, since it conjures up ideas of musical authenticity, a theme which was introduced many times by the participants. In order to explore this in more depth, I asked her to explain more specifically why she felt the video was "fake". In doing so, I picked up on a specific point made by a participant which I felt was particularly notable and interesting, steering the conversation so that I could find out more about it.

Bridget: Do you like any particular Katy Perry songs?

Erin: I like "Roar", but the music video's horrible.

Bridget: You don't like it?

Erin: It's very cheesy. I don't like it. She's just like (pulls exaggerated face) ... (laughs) ... it's so fake.

Bridget: Yeah ... what's fake about it?

Erin: It's just, she overreacts, which is good in musical theatre, but on the screen it's not very good. You need to overreact in musical theatre but when you're in a film you've got to play it down.⁸

This technique proved useful and allowed me to go into more depth than would otherwise have been possible, particularly in the focus group discussions.

For a list of prompts and question ideas that I used to keep the conversations going, see Appendix A. Although I took this list to all of the focus groups and interviews, I mostly used it as a prompt sheet rather than an interview script, drawing on it for ideas rather than following it rigidly. In addition to these verbal prompts, I also invited the girls to bring their own music magazines and audio recordings to the focus groups and interviews, in order to generate discussion. Some of the girls did this, bringing pictures of bands and musicians to the focus

⁸ This quotation is featured on p. 128, as part of my analysis.

groups and interviews, while others played short snippets of music. In most cases, however, the girls needed little encouragement and were happy to talk about their musical tastes without being prompted or questioned directly.

To ensure that I had collected enough data, I continued to recruit participants until I had reached the data saturation point. The saturation point is defined as the point at which the researcher can be confident that no new themes will arise from further data collection (Charmaz, 2006). Having carried out the research with 53 participants at two Guide units and two schools, I found that, in general, the same themes were beginning to emerge in all of the focus groups and interviews. In other words, the participants brought up many of the same topics throughout their discussions. This is not to say that their discussions were not varied or interesting; indeed, all of their responses were unique and they expressed a range of different opinions. Crucially, though, there were a number of common themes running through the data. Moreover, certain points were raised by many of the girls, and they often used the same words and phrases during their discussions. I therefore felt, after carrying out 20 focus groups and 12 interviews, that my data told a consistent, coherent story about my participants' lives, experiences and engagement with music. At this point, I felt satisfied that I had reached the saturation point and that I had collected sufficient data to conduct a detailed analysis of the girls' discourse.

2.4 The role of the researcher

As explained earlier in this chapter, qualitative methods situate research within its social context, focusing on communication, expression and discourse. Consequently, focus groups and interviews should be viewed as social events. Researchers should therefore maintain an awareness of social factors, such as gender, ethnicity and class, which may influence how participants interact with one another (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 47). Kvale (1996) argues that it is unfeasible for researchers to create a "neutral" research environment by eliminating power differences between individuals (p. 125). Instead, researchers should simply bear these issues in mind, considering possible ways to minimise and manage the impact of unequal power relations in their work.

In most research scenarios, the greatest power imbalance exists between the researcher and the research subject, and it is usually the researcher who occupies the more powerful position within this relationship (Kvale, 1996, p. 126). To address this issue in my own work, it was necessary for me to reflect on my own positionality, considering how this might impact on the interactions which took place during the research process. As Charmaz (2006) argues, the

researcher is always “within” the research, rather than outside it (p. 180). Because of this, scholars are generally in agreement that, when carrying out qualitative research, a degree of self-reflection is necessary (Behar, 1996; Järviluoma et al., 2003; N. K. Miller, 1991).

The most significant difference between me and my participants was, of course, age. In research involving children, it is important to acknowledge that the adult researcher always occupies a more powerful position than the child subject (Mayall, 2008; Robinson & Kellett, 2004). Because of the obvious power difference between children and adults, children tend to view adults as authority figures, and this can affect their behaviour in a number of different ways, depending on the context and the specific individuals involved. Sometimes children are more reticent to share their opinions with adults, and this can make them seem quieter and less opinionated than adult participants. Equally, children are sometimes reluctant to tell adults what they really think, and they may deal with this by saying what they think an adult would want to hear. On the other hand, some children are more talkative with adults than with other children, and they may be particularly keen to air their views to someone they regard as an authority figure; children’s opinions are often brushed off by adults and, because of this, an interview with an interested adult researcher might seem like a special privilege to many child participants. What children choose to say to an adult researcher might also depend on other factors, such as the perceived status of the researcher, and whether the researcher is a man or a woman.

In order to minimise the power difference between me and my participants, I tried to make my appearance as “neutral” as possible, trying hard to project a youthful, relaxed and informal impression. In doing so, I drew on Lowe’s (2004) reflective account of her research with girl participants:

Although I am around fifteen years older than the girls in the focus groups, I tried to dampen the sense of generational difference by dressing as they did (mostly cut-off shorts and T-shirts), wearing little or no makeup (even though, of course, most of the girls wear eyeliner, mascara, and lipstick or gloss) ... (p. 82)

This was not particularly difficult, given my age and physical appearance. Like Lowe, I was relatively close in age to my participants, who were between 10 and 15 years younger than me. Furthermore, I am physically small in stature and, because of this, I am often mistaken for someone younger. To emphasise this, I wore flat shoes and very little makeup when attending the schools and Guide groups. At Guide meetings, I dressed casually, in jeans, trainers, t-shirts and jumpers. At the schools, I dressed in a relaxed “smart casual” style, wearing smart flat shoes, office trousers and plain tops. This strategy was effective; the participants did not seem to

find me at all intimidating, and a few of them even remarked that I looked too young to be at university.

It is equally important for researchers to consider the space in which their research will take place, considering how this might impact on their participants' interactions. For example, researchers should think about the layout of the room they are using, considering how they will arrange the furniture and whether people will be sitting or standing during the planned activities. I paid close attention to this during my own research, trying to maintain an awareness of my own use of space during the focus groups and interviews. Again, I drew on Lowe's (2004) reflections on her use of space during her research:

[I remained] on their physical level at all times. Usually we all sat on the floor or lounged on gym mats. I avoided standing before the group and addressing them as a teacher or counsellor might. (p. 82)

Before each focus group, I positioned the relevant number of chairs in a circle (sometimes around a table), so that all of the participants were equal. By occupying one of these chairs, I also presented myself as an equal, and this made me appear less imposing. During the interviews, I made sure that I did not sit directly opposite the interviewee; instead, I arranged the chairs at an angle, so that I was only partially facing my interviewee. In order to avoid coming across as an authority figure (like a teacher or a Guide leader), I remained seated throughout the focus groups and interviews, trying to stay on the same physical level as the girls at all times. These measures helped me to create a more relaxed and egalitarian environment for my participants.

It is important to acknowledge that, despite attempts to minimise the power difference between the researcher and the participants, the researcher is *always*, to an extent, an "outsider" within the research setting (Edwards & Ribbens, 1998). This, however, is not necessarily a disadvantage; instead, this "outsider status" can be viewed as an advantage, since it allows the researcher to take on a detached perspective that is not normally available to insiders. As Atkinson and Hammersley (2007) argue, researchers should always try to remain "anthropologically strange" (p. 9), even in familiar settings, making their biases and assumptions explicit throughout the research process.

This is particularly important in research involving children, since the power difference between adults and children is so marked (Mayall, 2008). Mandell (1988) suggests that scholars conducting research with child participants should take on the "least-adult role", immersing themselves in the social lives of their young participants and adopting their language and rapport. However, some researchers have argued that such an approach is unfeasible, since

children are usually able to see through adults' attempts to fit in with them, which they often regard as inauthentic and intrusive. McRobbie (1978) notes that, in her research with working-class girls, she found it difficult to become involved in the girls' tight-knit friendship groups, describing her young female participants as secretive, withdrawn and private. B. Thorne (1993) encountered similar problems in her research into children's gendered play, noting that her young participants were not always convinced by her efforts to blend in with them; as a result, she struggled to maintain this role throughout her research. To avoid this problem, Mayall (2008) suggests that, rather than trying to imitate children, researchers should aim to work *with* children. K. A. Martin (1996) employed this strategy effectively in her qualitative research with children, projecting an identity that was both authoritative *and* informal by presenting herself as a cross between a teacher and an older friend (p. 4). I followed this example in my own work; rather than trying to eliminate the perceived age difference between me and my participants, I tried to present myself as a friendly, approachable older figure.

It is vital to maintain this outsider status during the analysis stage of a qualitative study, in order to preserve the "analytical distance" (Wessels, 2007, p. 48) between the researcher and the participants. Kvale (1996) argues that this "deliberate naïveté" (p. 31) allows for a more critical interpretation of research data. Atkinson and Hammersley (2007) note that, by keeping their participants at a distance, researchers may gain a more detached insight into the lives of their research subjects:

There must always remain some part held back, some social and intellectual "distance". For it is in the space created by this distance that the analytic work of the ethnographer gets done. Without that distance, without such analytic space, the ethnography can be little more than the autobiographical account of a personal conversion. (p. 90)

For this reason, I felt it was important for me to be reflexive, rather than autobiographical, in my work. To do this, I tried to avoid identifying too closely with my participants, instead maintaining my status as an outsider so that I could observe my participants from a critical – yet sympathetic – distance.

There were also many other differences between me and my participants, in addition to age. As I explain in the following section (which provides a breakdown of my population sample), I recruited a diverse cohort of participants to take part in my research, including girls from a range of different backgrounds. Following the work of intersectional feminist theorists like Crenshaw (1989, 1991) and Hill Collins (2000), scholars have argued that girlhood encompasses a range of intersecting identities relating to multiple issues, including race, class, sexuality and culture (Driscoll, 2002; Walkerdine, Lucey, & Melody, 2001). As such,

researchers working with girls should remain mindful of this, acknowledging the existence of multiple, diverse girlhoods. I tried to bear these differences in mind during my own research, viewing my participants from the perspective of an interested outsider, and I was careful not to assume a universal shared experience of girlhood.

2.5 The population sample

This section offers a detailed overview of my population sample, which contextualises my findings and offers additional supplementary information about my participants. As explained in the section above, it is crucial that girlhood researchers do not universalise or essentialise their findings, and this is particularly true of qualitative research, which often relies on relatively small population samples and is generally not intended to be representative (Mason, 2002, p. 126). It is therefore vital that researchers provide sufficient information about their participants, so that their research may be situated within its social and cultural context. By providing as much information as possible about my participants, I shed light on the individuals who took part in my research, offering insight into their lives and backgrounds.

In this section, I consider a range of different factors, including socio-economic status, educational background, ethnicity and religion. To do this, I review demographic data gathered during my research, combining this with relevant information in the public domain. To begin with, I provide a brief overview of each of the Guide units and schools, describing the geographical area in which they were situated and the populations that they served. I then describe the demographic make-up of my population sample, concentrating on the socio-economic background of my participants.

Upper Woodvale Guides was a large Guide unit located in a suburban housing estate, just outside a small city in the north of England. The group met once a week in a church hall. Although the estate itself had relatively low levels of deprivation, some nearby areas were moderately deprived. Participants from Upper Woodvale Guides attended three different local schools: Woodvale Grove School (a mixed-sex, non-religious state secondary school sponsored by a multi-academy trust), All Saints RC School (a mixed-sex, voluntary aided Roman Catholic state secondary school) and St Mary's RC Primary School (a mixed-sex, voluntary aided Roman Catholic state primary school). These schools had a high proportion of white British pupils, and the vast majority of pupils at these schools spoke English as their first language. The proportion of pupils receiving free school meals at these schools was below the national average.

St Hilda's Guides was a smaller Guide unit located in the same city. The group met weekly in a church hall situated in an urban area close to the city centre. Although this particular neighbourhood had a fairly low level of deprivation, it was surrounded by several very deprived areas. The participants from St Hilda's Guides attended two schools: Queen Elizabeth's High School (an independent girls' day school) and St Anne's C of E Primary School (a mixed-sex, voluntary controlled Church of England state primary school). These schools served a more affluent population than the schools attended by the Upper Woodvale Guides, particularly Queen Elizabeth's High School, a prestigious fee-paying school with a reputation for high academic attainment. Few pupils at St Anne's C of E Primary School received free school meals. Compared with the suburban schools attended by the Upper Woodvale Guides, these schools had a higher proportion of pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds and a higher proportion of pupils who spoke English as an additional language.

The schools that I visited were in a different – much larger – city, also located in the north of England. Trinity High School was a large, mixed-sex Roman Catholic secondary school which was situated in a relatively prosperous neighbourhood. Many of the pupils came from fairly affluent backgrounds, and the proportion of pupils receiving free school meals was below the national average. An average proportion of pupils at the school came from minority ethnic backgrounds.

Burnside Hill Academy was a small, mixed-sex state secondary school sponsored by a multi-academy trust. The school was located in a deprived suburban neighbourhood, and many of the pupils came from disadvantaged backgrounds. Because of this, a very high proportion of the pupils were eligible for pupil premium, government funding which supports the education of economically-disadvantaged children, children in the care of the local authority and children whose parents serve in the armed forces. Pupils at Burnside Hill Academy came from a broad range of ethnic backgrounds, and the proportion of pupils who spoke English as an additional language was well above the national average. The school also had a very high proportion of pupils with special educational needs, learning difficulties and disabilities.

During the research, the participants were encouraged to fill in a short questionnaire asking them to describe their parents' jobs and their approximate area of residence. To interpret the data on parental occupation, I categorised each response according to the type of occupation specified. When a participant had specified two different jobs, I used the "highest" occupation as the indicator (I defined this as the occupation requiring the highest level of education or training).

The girls' parents were employed in a wide range of different roles. This included managerial positions (e.g. managing director) and graduate professions (e.g. doctor, optician, academic, accountant or dentist). Others were employed in non-graduate professions (e.g. nurse), technical roles (e.g. computer mechanic) and administrative roles (e.g. clerical support officer). There were also a number of skilled manual workers (e.g. hairdresser, beautician, mechanic or chef) and unskilled workers (e.g. cleaner). One girl had parents who were not in work, and one had parents who were students. Out of 53 participants, 22 had parents who fell into the category of "graduate professional", making this the largest category. The second largest category was "skilled manual", with 8 participants. For a full breakdown of this information, see Appendix B, Figure B1.

To interpret the data on the participants' local neighbourhoods, I used the Index of Multiple Deprivation, from the English Indices of Deprivation ("Indices of Deprivation 2015 explorer", 2015). Figure B2 of Appendix B shows the participants' neighbourhoods categorised into deciles representing relative levels of deprivation, from the "10% least deprived" to the "10% most deprived".

Most of the girls came from areas with a lower-than-average level of deprivation. Out of 53 participants, 20 came from neighbourhoods in the "10% least deprived" category. There were also several participants from very deprived areas, with 12 coming from neighbourhoods in the "10% most deprived" category. This shows that the majority of participants came from areas with either very high or very low levels of deprivation. This is likely to be a reflection of the catchment areas served by the schools and Guide units.

2.6 Reflections on the focus groups and interviews

Both the focus groups and the interviews proved to be productive data-collection methods, and together they yielded a rich and interesting data set. In this section, I reflect on my experience of carrying out the research, considering the differences between the focus groups and the interviews. I also describe the context in which the research took place, considering how this impacted on the research activities. Finally, I consider the impact of other factors, such as the girls' relationships with one another and their ability to express themselves.

In many ways, the focus group discussions were similar to the everyday conversations which take place within girl groups. Often, their conversations were lively and exuberant, involving silliness, laughter, singing, dancing and other forms of physical movement (such as gesture).

The tone of the focus groups was generally playful and tongue-in-cheek, and the girls frequently engaged in a kind of fast-paced, light-hearted banter, gently mocking each other for comic effect. Sometimes, their discussions became whimsical and imaginative, involving elaborate flights of fancy, during which the girls would concoct implausible, and often very funny, stories about pop stars and celebrities. These interactions acted as a form of social play (Rubin, Fein, & Vandenberg, 1983) which helped the girls to bond with one another, providing them with an opportunity to explore their ideas creatively in a social setting.

Focus groups are often sites of interpersonal tension, and it is important for researchers to bear this in mind when conducting their research. It was particularly important for me to do this, since the participants in my own study already knew one another prior to the research. As a result, I was unaware of the friendships, tensions and rivalries which may have existed between the participants. As with any social encounter, the focus groups were never truly “equal”. Several of the groups were dominated by one or two participants (usually the more confident girls) and, because of this, the quieter girls often took on a more passive role. Although these dynamics were never explicitly problematic, it is likely that they may have had an impact on the girls’ discussions.

To an extent, the interpersonal dynamics of the focus groups also seemed to be somewhat influenced by the age of the participants. While the oldest girls were often very articulate, expressing their ideas clearly and confidently through spoken language, the youngest girls (particularly those who were just 10 years old, who were still in primary school) were generally more inclined to express themselves through singing, movement, gesture and the kind of verbal play described earlier in this section (e.g. joking, light-hearted mockery and playful flights of fancy).

This was particularly noticeable in one focus group, in which all of the participants were 10 years old. This focus group involved far more movement, gesture and singing than the others. The age of the participants was also notable in another focus group, in which three of the participants were 13 years old and one was 10 years old. In this group, there was a noticeable age gap between the three older girls, who expressed their views clearly and confidently throughout the discussion, and the youngest girl, who seemed more reserved. Interestingly, in this instance, the older girls seemed to recognise this power difference, and they attempted to minimise it by actively encouraging the youngest girl to contribute to the discussion, giving her a chance to respond and express her views.

Despite this, it is not possible to generalise about the role that age might have played in the girls' interactions. All of the participants were different, and they each behaved very differently, regardless of age; for example, some of the older girls were very quiet, while some of the younger girls were extremely talkative and self-assured. Indeed, the discussions seemed to be shaped far more by the girls' personalities than by their age.

Overall, the group setting seemed to create a mood of consensus amongst the participants; the girls mostly expressed agreement with one another and conflicting opinions were rarely voiced. On the rare occasions when conflict did arise, it was usually instigated by one of the more confident girls. These disagreements were quickly smoothed over by the participants, and the conversations were usually swiftly diverted to other, less controversial topics.

The one-to-one interviews were less lively than the focus groups, and were generally more thoughtful, measured and subdued. As I had hoped, the girls went into more depth during the interviews, and their responses tended to be more reflective and personal. They also seemed to be more open about their beliefs and opinions in this context, probably because they were not being observed by their peers.

In general, the views expressed by the participants were remarkably similar, even across the different Guide units and schools; indeed, it was the *manner* in which they expressed their opinions, rather than the opinions themselves, which differed most. Overall, the participants seemed more relaxed at the Guides than they did at the schools, and their discussions tended to be more light-hearted, fanciful and imaginative. This may well reflect the safe, inclusive ethos promoted by Girlguiding, an organisation which aims to “empower girls to find their voice” through “fun, friendship, challenge and adventure” (Girlguiding, n.d., para. 2). In contrast, the schools had a more formal atmosphere and, although I tried hard to make the participants feel relaxed and comfortable, they seemed to remain in “school mode” throughout the research, and were generally more restrained and sensible than the Guides. As a result, their discussions tended to be more logical and analytical than the Guide's discussions.

The girls' discussions at Trinity High School were very different from the discussions at Burnside Hill Academy. At Trinity High School, the pupils tended to be confident, outgoing and talkative; their conversations were often critical and reflexive, and many of the girls were able to articulate relatively complex ideas effectively. At times, their discussions resembled debates, with the girls taking turns to speak, and the more confident girls encouraging the quieter ones to contribute their ideas. When this happened, it was instigated by the girls themselves, some of whom seemed to expect discussions to be structured in this way.

This may well reflect the ethos of Trinity High School, which seemed to foster a safe and open environment in which pupils felt able to express themselves openly. During their discussions, I got the sense that this particular group of girls had been given the opportunity to practise their debating skills, and that they had been encouraged to view their opinions as valuable. To an extent, this may reflect the demographic profile of these participants, since pupils at Trinity High School generally came from relatively affluent, middle-class areas. Children from affluent backgrounds are often more confident than children from less affluent backgrounds, and there are many complex reasons for this. Often, these children benefit from a more privileged home life; their parents often have more time to spend with their children, better childcare options and greater access to educational resources, such as books. Children from affluent backgrounds also often have access to educational opportunities that are not available to other children, such as private tuition, instrumental lessons and extra-curricular activities, all of which contribute to their overall personal, social and educational development.

The pupils at Burnside Hill Academy seemed less articulate and talkative than the pupils at Trinity High School. In general, they required more encouragement during discussions, and they were more cautious about expressing their opinions. Their discussions were also less egalitarian, and they tended to be dominated by one or two confident individuals.

Again, this may relate to the school environment. Burnside Hill Academy was a culturally-diverse school situated in a relatively deprived area, with a high proportion of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. Many of the pupils had disabilities or learning difficulties, and many of them spoke English as an additional language. Schools serving economically-deprived populations are often over-stretched, lacking the time and resources to address the complex additional needs of their pupils. This may explain why the participants at Burnside Hill Academy seemed less accustomed to taking part in debates; teachers at this school may not have been able to offer their pupils the chance to engage in regular class debates, given the additional pressures imposed on them. The girls' families may also have been affected by other problems relating to economic deprivation, such as disability, ill-health and financial problems. It was clear from their discussions that, unlike the girls at Trinity High School, they did not have the same access to extra-curricular activities; indeed, some of them mentioned that they were unable to attend instrumental lessons because of financial constraints, or because instrumental tuition was not available at their school or in their local area. As a result, the girls at this school may have had limited opportunities to develop their communication skills, compared with the girls at Trinity High School.

2.7 Analysing the data

Data analysis is an important stage in any research project. During this process, the researcher begins to make sense of the data, exploring the meanings that emerge from it. S. Thorne (2000) calls qualitative data analysis “the most complex and mysterious of all of the phases of a qualitative project” (p. 68), arguing that researchers sometimes fail to explain their analytical methods adequately. To avoid this, Richie and Spencer (1994) argue that qualitative researchers should be thorough and transparent when describing their analytical methods (p. 175). In this section, I address this, explaining my analytical approach and the methods I used to interpret my data.

There are many different approaches to the analysis of qualitative data. Some qualitative methods appropriate the principles of quantitative research (Mayring, 2000); for example, some methods of qualitative content analysis require the researcher to count key words or phrases within a data set (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). On the other hand, methods such as grounded theory apply a more open-ended, interpretative approach (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser, 1998). These methods allow the researcher to identify broad themes within data, capturing the nuances and complexities of discourse more effectively.

I tried to maintain a careful balance between these two positions in my own work, combining a rigorous, evidence-based focus with a more intuitive, exploratory approach to the interpretation of meaning in my data set. To preserve this balance, I conducted a thematic analysis, drawing on Braun and Clark’s (2006) step-by-step framework for the thematic analysis of qualitative data. I applied this framework somewhat flexibly, tailoring it to the specific demands of my research. Strauss and Corbin (2008) note that approaches to qualitative analysis should never be applied rigidly or prescriptively (p. 16). Instead, researchers should work towards a methodological framework that is sensitive to the requirements of the specific research project (Kvale, 1996, p. 13; Mason, 2002, p. 24), employing a “fluid, interactive, and open-ended” approach (Charmaz, 2006, p. 178).

To conduct a thematic analysis, the researcher must first become familiar with his or her data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The transcription process provides a valuable opportunity to do this, since it requires the researcher to pay close attention to the data. In my own research, this was a long and meticulous process. The audio recordings of the focus groups were extremely busy, with participants frequently talking over one another. This made it difficult to transcribe the girls’ discussions, since I had to untangle long passages of overlapping speech. Given the richness and complexity of my data, I felt that it was important for me to transcribe the focus

groups as accurately as possible, preserving the essence of the girls' conversations, which were often lively, exuberant and unpredictable. Where necessary, I documented the girls' tone of voice, indicating when they were being sarcastic, flippant or humorous. I also documented singing, non-verbal utterances and instances of physical movement (such as dancing and gesture). This helped me create a detailed picture of the girls' discourse, allowing for a more thorough analysis of the data.

Because of their age, the participants did not always communicate clearly, and they sometimes struggled to express themselves. Occasionally, they used words that were unfamiliar to me and, very often, they used very vague, ambiguous language; for example, the word "weird" was used frequently by the girls in a variety of different contexts, to describe many different things. It was therefore sometimes necessary for me to "read between the lines" when interpreting the girls' talk, examining the context surrounding some of their utterances. In doing so, I took on the role of the authoritative researcher, using my knowledge of the data set to interpret the girls' responses. To an extent, all qualitative researchers must take on this role, since the process of data analysis requires the researcher to impose his or her own critical perspective on the data (Charmaz, 2006).

Once I had become familiar with the data, I completed the initial coding stage of my thematic analysis. Within qualitative research, codes represent key units of information within the data (Charmaz, 2006, p. 42). To code the transcripts, I read and re-read them systematically, identifying any interesting or significant features. Throughout the coding process, I tried to let the data guide my analysis, rather than imposing my own pre-conceived assumptions on to it. In general, I considered words, phrases and ideas to be notable if they recurred frequently across the data set, or if they were specifically related to my research questions. Following Charmaz's (2006) advice, I completed the coding phase as quickly and spontaneously as possible, "staying close to the data and, when possible, starting from the words and actions of [my] respondents" (p. 49).

The next stage was to sort my codes into themes. While codes represent brief snippets of information within a data set, themes represent broader strands of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Again, I tried to approach this task with a "fresh eye", reading through the coded data and responding to it in an instinctive, intuitive manner. I also found it helpful to create a visual "thematic map" of my notes. Once I had identified several themes, I gave each one a title and a short description. I then categorised the coded data under relevant themes. Creating a visual representation of these themes helped me to make sense of the relationships between them, and the story that they told about the data.

In order to organise my data more efficiently, I used NVivo, a computer software package which supports the analysis of unstructured qualitative data. This program helped me to sort through my data, categorising segments of text under various codes and themes (for an example of an extract from a coded transcript, showing how codes and themes were identified within the text, see Appendix C, Figure C1). NVivo also allowed me to visualise my findings, helping me to see patterns and connections within my data set. In addition, it enabled me to search through my data quickly and effectively, identifying key words and phrases in the text, a function which proved enormously useful. It is important to note, however, that NVivo is primarily an organisational tool, which is mostly used to compile, collate and examine data. As such, it did not play a significant role in the actual process of analysis, and it did not influence how I interpreted my findings.

My analysis explored how my participants discussed music and how this related to their construction of identity. As explained in my introductory chapter, I view identity as a construct that is produced through the act of positioning, the process which occurs when individuals use discourse to take up subject positions (see pp. 11–13). Currie, Kelly and Pomerantz (2007) argue that positioning is not just a theoretical concept, it is also a social practice which may be observed by researchers through discourse analysis (p. 381). Drawing on the use of positioning theory by Currie et al. in their own study of girlhood and identity, I incorporated this theory into my methodology, using this approach to explore how my participants negotiated discourse to occupy various subject positions. This allowed me to gain an overview of the broader ideological context surrounding the girls, exploring the discourses that were afforded to them within this context. In doing so, I was able to gain an understanding of the possibilities available to the girls, and also the constraints which limited their use of discourse. This approach offers a solution to the problem of studying people's first-hand experiences. By exploring how people mediate their experiences through discourse, researchers can investigate how individuals employ discursive systems (such as language) to represent their own reality.

Keeping the concept of subject position in mind, I sought to identify instances when the participants took up and rejected certain positions. I tried to view these moments in context, considering the interplay between the different subjectivities adopted by the girls. I also considered why the participants adopted certain positions and rejected others, exploring how this enabled them to assert power and status within their social worlds. In this sense, I was less concerned with *what* music the girls liked, focusing instead on *why* they liked certain kinds of music and *how* they used discourses of value to explain and justify their preferences.

During the course of my analysis, I tried not to focus too much on the many inconsistencies and contradictions expressed by the girls. Throughout their discussions, they frequently expressed conflicting opinions, and their musical judgements often seemed to bear little relation to these beliefs. The participants did not seem to experience cognitive dissonance as a result of these contradictions, and they seemed perfectly capable of holding (and articulating) multiple conflicting opinions simultaneously.

Currie et al. (2009) note that contradiction is a normal feature of spoken discourse which should be regarded as unproblematic by qualitative researchers (p. 72). When expressing their opinions, people sometimes express multiple conflicting ideas, and this phenomenon is often observed in qualitative research (Mason, 2002). L. M. Brown (1998) argues that these contradictions are a symptom of the struggle of individuals to negotiate competing discourses (p. 106). As stated by Foucault (1978), contradictory discourses can sometimes co-exist harmoniously in a given context, and these contradictions are often a symptom of existing ideological tensions within that context.

Rather than trying to iron out any inconsistencies in the girls' talk, I instead followed the advice of Currie et al. (2007), reading these contradictions as “‘symptoms’ of how power works through discourse” (p. 381). As a girlhood researcher, I sought to shed light on these contradictions, since girlhood is itself constituted through the expression of tension and conflict; in order to perform femininity successfully, girls must navigate a minefield of contradictory discourses (Griffin, 2004, p. 42). It is through the constant negotiation of these discourses that girlhood emerges (L. M. Brown, 1998, p. 106; Currie et al., 2007, p. 381); as Driscoll (2002) notes, “the conjunction of these discourses on self and social formation in the figure of the girl has enabled the girl to figure as an image of change, crisis, and personal and cultural tensions” (p. 305). By reading the girls' discourse in all its complexity and nuance, I was therefore able to gain an insight into the ways that girls use discourse to actively construct identities.

Given that my analytical method revolves around the analysis of discourse, it is important to address some of the potential limitations and pitfalls of discourse analysis. In particular, it is worth considering the crucial distinction between discourse and practice. This is especially relevant to my own research, since my study aims to use discourse analysis to gain a better understanding of girls' “real-world” or “everyday” engagement with music (in other words, their “practice”). It is therefore vital to acknowledge that data collected during focus groups and interviews does not necessarily represent the “real-world” experiences of participants. Instead, it represents their subjective beliefs and ideas, expressed through spoken language by a specific individual at a specific time within a specific social context. Focus groups and interviews are

themselves unlike most social encounters, since they are artificially engineered for the purpose of generating data. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the discourse which occurs during these encounters might not occur elsewhere. It is also important to consider the performativity of this discourse, since participants may be keen to project a particular image or impression of themselves to the researcher and the other participants.

To address this issue, I maintained a critical perspective throughout my analysis. Rather than simply accepting what the participants said as “fact” or “truth”, I situated their discourse within a relevant context, considering the social function of their responses and why they expressed themselves in certain ways. In doing so, my work raises further questions about the perceived distinction between discourse and practice. Indeed, given the performativity of the discourse which occurs in research, is this discourse not itself a form of practice? Keeping this question in mind, my work explores the practical or practice-based uses of discourse within the wider social world. As such, my work bridges the gap between discourse and practice, showing that, although discourse does not necessarily *represent* practice, the two are nonetheless inextricably linked.

3 The Musical Lives of the Participants: An Overview

This chapter provides an overview of my participants' musical lives, describing their tastes, listening habits and musical practices. In it, I briefly describe the girls' everyday engagement with music – at home, in school and in the wider social world. I also consider popular culture more broadly, exploring the girls' engagement with a range of media, including online media. This situates the girls' discourse within a broader cultural landscape, providing context for my analysis.

3.1 The girls' musical preferences

Throughout the focus groups and interviews, the girls talked enthusiastically about popular music, and it was clear that music was enormously important to them. In general, they seemed highly engaged with the culture surrounding popular music; most of them had a broad knowledge of popular music, and it was evident that they spent a lot of time listening to music and talking about it with friends.

Pop music was by far the most popular genre amongst my participants, particularly mainstream chart pop. Throughout my work, I use terms such as “pop”, “mainstream pop” and “chart pop” to refer to this kind of music. Most of the music discussed by the girls was “popular” in a literal sense, and most of the songs they mentioned had, at some point, been in the UK music charts. In general, they preferred music which conformed to the conventions of “pop” music; in other words, they liked catchy, accessible music performed by well-known pop singers and groups, with memorable lyrics and melodies. Because of this, my work focuses primarily on this type of music, although other styles are also occasionally mentioned throughout.

The girls mostly discussed solo female pop stars, such as Adele, Taylor Swift, Lady Gaga, Ariana Grande, Nicki Minaj and Katy Perry. Their interest in these stars may reflect the recent trend in mainstream pop music for solo female performers. It may, however, also indicate that the girls identified with these women; in general, they seemed to take these performers fairly seriously and, when discussing them, they tended to be earnest and thoughtful. Although the participants also occasionally mentioned girl groups, such as Little Mix and The Saturdays, they seemed somewhat less interested in them. Again, this may simply reflect the fact that, in recent years, there have been fewer high-profile girl groups than solo female performers.

In terms of male pop stars, the girls were very interested in boy bands, such as One Direction, 5 Seconds of Summer and The Vamps. They regarded the members of these bands as heartthrobs, viewing them as “eye candy” rather than “serious” musicians. They seemed conscious that these stars were intended to be viewed in this way, and they were acutely aware that boy bands were marketed specifically at a young female audience. Consequently, their discussions of boy bands had a very different tone from their discussions of female pop stars; rather than being serious and sincere, these discussions were often jokey and playful, particularly during the focus groups. Although many of the girls clearly admired these male heartthrobs, they were also often very critical of them. During the focus groups, they frequently lambasted male pop stars for comic effect, ridiculing their appearance, clothing and mannerisms. This playful mockery offered a way for the girls to bond with one another, and it was clear that they enjoyed these humorous discussions, which were a source of much amusement.

Many of the girls also liked male solo performers, such as Ed Sheeran, Sam Smith and Jake Bugg. The girls did not see these stars as heartthrobs. Instead, they viewed them as “serious” singer-songwriters and, as a result, they tended to focus on the musical and artistic output of these performers, rather than on their personality, appearance or perceived attractiveness.

In terms of other popular genres, the participants sometimes mentioned rap and R&B performers, such as Chris Brown, Jason Derulo and Eminem, as well as electronic dance music DJs, such as Avicii, Tiësto, David Guetta and Calvin Harris. In addition, some of the girls listened to country and folk-influenced pop bands, such as Of Monsters and Men and The Band Perry.

Many of the participants acknowledged that their musical tastes had been influenced by their relatives (usually their fathers). Because of this, some of them had been introduced to rock and pop acts from the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, such as David Bowie, AC/DC and Oasis. Some of the girls had been introduced to even older bands, such as The Beatles and The Beach Boys, and a few of them mentioned listening to Elvis Presley with their families. Given that the girls’ parents would themselves probably not have been old enough to remember this music, it is possible that they might have been introduced to it by their own parents (the grandparents of the participants). Older siblings also seemed to be hugely influential in the girls’ lives, and several of the girls mentioned that their older brothers and sisters had introduced them to different kinds of popular music, such as rock music and electronic dance music.

A few of the girls listened to non-Western or non-Anglophone popular styles, such as Bollywood music, Turkish pop music and Arabic pop music. Their engagement with these styles was related to their cultural heritage. For example, Nadia's interest in Bollywood music was closely tied up with her identity as the British-born daughter of Pakistani immigrants.

We're from Pakistan but I was born in here. I'm not Indian though, but ... I like the Bollywood music, a bit ... because everyone likes their own music what they've got because like there's other people as well ... people who like their own tradition music. That's like me, I like mine. But still, I, I listen to English songs as well.
(Nadia)

Some of the girls had also been introduced to non-Western religious music. Sian, for example, explained that her mother had tried to encourage her to listen to Kenyan gospel music, despite her general disinterest in this type of music.

My mum's trying to get me to listen to like music from different countries 'cause she's from Africa. And, erm, yeah, so she's trying to get me into that but I'm not too keen on it to be honest ... it's all in like a different language and she's just like ... she's trying to get me into gospel songs from [Kenya] but I don't really ...
(Sian)

Some of the participants at Trinity High School also enjoyed listening to classical music. Many of these girls had a basic knowledge of the classical canon, and some of them identified composers whose work they particularly liked, such as Bach, Schubert and Mendelssohn. Unlike the other participants, this particular group of girls seemed comfortable discussing classical music amongst themselves, and there did not seem to be any stigma attached to classical music at this school.

Notably, all of the girls who took part in the study at Trinity High School participated in some form of extra-curricular musical activity in their spare time, in addition to learning music as part of the formal school curriculum. For example, many of them received instrumental or vocal lessons, and many also took part in musical ensembles such as wind bands, brass bands and choirs. The music department at this school seemed to be very classically-oriented, with a high proportion of pupils receiving music tuition at school. For these girls, classical music seemed to be a normal part of life, and several of them mentioned that their parents listened to classical music as well. In addition to this, a minority of the girls mentioned that their parents played orchestral instruments or sang in choirs, and one girl (who was herself a grade 8 violinist) stated that her father was a professional violinist.

The fact that these girls were relatively familiar with classical music may also relate to their upbringing, educational background and socio-economic status. The girls at Trinity High School

tended to come from more privileged, middle-class backgrounds than the other participants – in general, they came from relatively affluent neighbourhoods, and many had parents employed in professions requiring a high level of educational attainment or training. Research has shown that classical listeners tend to come from relatively highly-educated backgrounds (Mike Savage, 2006, p. 169). This may explain, in part, why so many of these participants had been introduced to classical music by their parents, and why they had been encouraged to pursue classical music as a hobby. Even those who had not been actively introduced to classical music might have heard it in passing (for example, around the house), particularly if their parents were themselves fans of classical music.

In contrast, classical music was rarely mentioned at Burnside Hill Academy or at the Guide groups. When classical music was mentioned by these participants, it was usually discussed in disparaging terms. It is perhaps notable that, on the whole, these participants were drawn from less economically-privileged populations than the girls at Trinity High School, particularly those from Burnside Hill Academy. It is also worth noting that the music department at Burnside Hill was very different from Trinity High School's music department, and that music lessons at this school seemed to focus primarily on popular music rather than classical styles. The pupils at Burnside Hill reported to me that they had recently taken part in a workshop on rapping during one of their music lessons, and that they had been taught to use the software programme GarageBand, a digital music-making programme tailored to the needs of popular musicians and producers.

3.2 The role of music in everyday life

Much of the girls' listening took place in private, within the home. The bedroom offered a space in which they could listen to music alone, and this was described by some of the girls as a peaceful, focused, immersive activity. They also sometimes listened to music in the background while doing other things – for example, when they were doing homework or getting ready to go out. Some of the girls used portable devices, such as phones and iPods, to take their music outside the home. They used these devices at school and on public transport, using headphones so that they could listen to their music privately.

For the participants, music was a big part of family life. Many of the girls described how their parents would broadcast music throughout the house, sometimes as an accompaniment to household chores. Music was central to family celebrations, such as children's parties, holidays and weddings, and it played a very important role during car journeys. Music was also

sometimes a source of tension within families. Many of the participants described disagreements with family members about what music to put on, and some of them stated that they used loud music to signal their displeasure during family arguments.

Music also played a significant role in the girls' social lives, which revolved primarily around single-sex girl groups. Most of these groups were based at school or at extra-curricular clubs, although some of the girls also had friends who were neighbours or family friends. A few of them mentioned that they had one or two very close "best friends", who were usually also members of their wider friendship group. Within these groups, the girls talked about music a great deal and, consequently, their tastes were heavily influenced by their friends. Often, they engaged in musical activities with their friends, learning dance routines, singing along to their favourite songs and using music as an accompaniment to silly games.

When me and Vicky are together we put it on and it makes us like hyper and then we turn the music off then we just jump all about and ... play hide and ... there's this game called blind man's buff and you blindfold someone and go to play tig. That's what it just ... makes us want [sic] to do. Play things in the dark and fall over and just laugh. (Leanne)

These activities generally took place at school, or at informal get-togethers at friends' houses. Because most of the girls owned portable devices, they were able to carry their music with them at all times, and this meant that they could share music with their friends more easily.

Lots of the girls had attended live music events with both friends and family (because of their age, they always had to be accompanied by an adult at these events, even when they were with their friends). Many of them had been taken by their parents to see concerts by their favourite bands and performers, including Ed Sheeran, Katy Perry, One Direction and JLS. Attending these events was seen as a treat, and several of them mentioned that they had been given concert tickets by their parents as a birthday or Christmas present. Other live performances were also sometimes mentioned by the girls, including music festivals, both in the UK and abroad. Several participants mentioned that they were taken to a pantomime every year by their parents (pantomimes typically feature a mixture of drag, slapstick and comedy, as well as performances of old and new pop songs).

The girls also participated in a range of musical activities, and many of them were trained musicians, attending instrumental (or vocal) lessons and musical ensembles. Some were members of drama groups, and many had performed in stage musicals and talent shows. Some were accomplished dancers, performing in a range of different styles, including popular styles

(such as street dance, jazz and tap) and classical styles (such as ballet). A few of the girls were members of dance troupes, and one girl belonged to a prestigious youth ballet company.

A few of the girls were self-taught musicians (this generally applied to those who played popular instruments, such as the guitar). Some of the girls expressed an interest in forming rock or pop bands but were afraid to do so; they were conscious that performing popular music might invite ridicule from their peers, since it was generally considered unacceptable for a girl to play in a band. One participant stated that, although she enjoyed composing her own music, she felt unable to share her compositions with anyone except her mother, for fear of ridicule.

Ultimately, the girls' self-taught and self-directed music-making activities were somewhat more constrained than their formal music learning which took place within an educational or extra-curricular context.

3.3 Accessing music

The girls accessed music using a range of different technologies, and it is worth considering how these technologies shaped their everyday engagement with music. Recent decades have brought major technological developments which have radically altered how people engage with popular culture, not least the digital revolution of the 1970s and 1980s and the expansion of the internet in the 1990s and early 2000s. Such advancements have had a profound impact on the music industry, influencing how music is produced, circulated and consumed, and how information about music is disseminated by audiences (Burkart & McCourt, 2006; Connell & Gibson, 2003; Prior, 2018; T. D. Taylor, 2001; Werner, 2009).

Some of the participants accessed music in ways which did not require them to use the internet, for example, by purchasing CDs. Many of them also listened to the radio, particularly stations devoted to mainstream pop music, such as BBC Radio 1, Capital and local commercial radio stations.

In general, though, they mostly used the internet to access music. Some used software programmes such as iTunes to download music (iTunes users can do this by accessing the iTunes store, Apple's online digital media store). Many also streamed music using audio streaming services such as Spotify and video streaming platforms such as YouTube. They used YouTube to access both audio recordings and visual media (such as music videos). Although some online music services (such as YouTube) are free of charge, others (such as Spotify's "Premium" service) charge a subscription fee. These fees were paid for by the girls' parents.

Using applications like iTunes and Spotify offered the girls a more personalised way to store and organise their music collections; several of them mentioned that they used these programmes to curate unique playlists based on moods and emotions, for example, by creating a “happy” playlist of cheerful, upbeat songs.

The girls’ use of online media services reflects wider trends in the global music market. In 2015, digital music sales overtook physical sales for the first time, with downloads accounting for 20% of music industry revenue (International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI), 2016, p. 15). However, due to the rise of music streaming, downloads revenue has been in steady decline since 2013, when streaming revenue accounted for just 27% of all digital music revenue (IFPI, 2014, p. 7). Since then, streaming has become increasingly widespread and, in 2017, it became the largest source of global music revenue (IFPI, 2018, p. 10). As demonstrated in my research, video streaming platforms like YouTube are used to access music audio, as well as music videos; research carried out in 2015 found that 57% of internet users used video streaming sites to access music, and that 27% of internet users used these sites to listen to music without paying attention to the video content (IFPI, 2015, p. 7). To reflect these industry-wide changes, the Official Charts Company announced in 2014 that audio streaming would be taken into account in the UK singles chart (S. J. Griffiths, 2014), and in 2018 this was widened to include the streaming of official music videos (Mark Savage, 2018).

3.4 Audiovisual culture

As stated above, the girls in my study were frequent users of YouTube and, as a result, they were highly engaged with music videos. In general, they viewed popular music as a visual, as well as a sonic, medium. Because of this, they often used visually-oriented verbs, such as “watch” and “view”, to discuss how audiences engage with popular music.

If I was watching [TV] ... we’ll like go on to, like, [channel] 21 and 18 and watch like some of the music and stuff. (Imogen)

I don’t know [if] I have a favourite [performer], I just have artists that I like, because I think there’s like loads of different artists that you can watch, but I don’t really have a favourite. (Amelia)

I used to watch [Taylor Swift] because she doesn’t swear, so she is kind of a good influence. (Chloe)

If [Sam Smith] hadn’t got a good voice ... not a lot of people would view his songs. (Yasmin)

Little kids will probably like [Adele's] songs and she'll get better views than like ... than Miley Cyrus. (Yasmin)

Yasmin's use of the word "view" in the two quotations above suggests an engagement with YouTube culture; on YouTube, the term "views" refers to the number of times a video has been played, a measure which is typically used to quantify the popularity of videos.

Because of this focus on music video, it would be unhelpful to make a rigid distinction between *listening* and *watching*. The girls saw popular music as an audiovisual medium, and it was clear from their discussions that they did not separate the visual content of music videos from their sonic content. For the girls, pop songs were inextricably linked with the music videos that accompanied them, almost to the extent that they saw a song's music video as an essential *part* of the song itself. Indeed, it was not always entirely clear whether they were discussing the sonic or visual elements of a particular song or video, or whether they even distinguished between these elements at all.

Such an approach challenges the somewhat outdated view that music videos are short clips created by a record company to accompany a three- or four-minute commercial pop song. Early music videos tended to feature the band or artist either performing the song (usually in a mock concert setting), or acting out the song's lyrics in a narrative style. These clips were generally played on music television channels, such as MTV, in order to promote songs. This definition of music video proved useful during the "golden age of music video" in the 1980s and 1990s, when MTV was at its peak and music videos by pop icons, such as Michael Jackson and Madonna, were beginning to be seen as culturally-significant pop texts (Shaviro, 2017, p. 5). However, as Vernallis (2013) argues, this definition has become less relevant in recent years, largely due to the emergence of YouTube. The shift from music television to YouTube has, to an extent, liberated music video from its former constraints. Music videos no longer have to conform to the format of the three-minute pop song, and they are therefore less limited in terms of their narrative potential. As a result, music videos have generally become more filmic, with the visual and narrative content often taking precedence over the sonic content.

To contextualise music video within a contemporary media landscape, Vernallis (2013) argues that we should understand music video as part of an audiovisual turn, in which sound-image technologies are used to blend the musical with the visual (p. 5). As Korsgaard (2017) notes, this shift affects how audiences experience audiovisual media: the visualisation of music conjures up an impression of materiality, while the musicalisation of image creates a sense of rhythm, pulse and movement (pp. 58–59). Highlighting the intermediality of music video, Korsgaard notes that music video aesthetics have had a profound influence on other forms of

popular media, such as video games, interactive music videos, music video apps, remixes and user-generated online content (p. 12). With this shift has come a growing emphasis on the sonic, and it has become conventional to place the “soundtrack” at the centre of the media product, structuring the product’s visual content around its musical materials (Vernallis, 2013).

I keep this in mind throughout my work, situating the girls’ discourse within the context of a complex and constantly-evolving media culture. Rather than distinguishing between music video and musical sound, I take a holistic approach, viewing popular music as an increasingly audiovisual, multimedia form.

3.5 Multimedia, online media, social media

As explained above, the girls were immersed in a highly stimulating transmedial culture, and because of this they often came into contact with popular music through their engagement with other forms of media. Some of the girls mentioned that they enjoyed listening to the soundtracks of films such as *The Lego Movie* (2014), *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014) and the *Twilight* series (2008–12), all of which feature hit pop songs. Film musicals, such as *Sunshine on Leith* (2013), *Mamma Mia* (2008) and the *Pitch Perfect* franchise (2012–17), were also extremely popular amongst the participants, as were Disney cartoon musicals such as *Frozen* (2013). As mentioned earlier in this chapter, one participant (Nadia) was very interested in Bollywood films, citing the Hindi film *Heyy Babyy* (2007) as a particular favourite.

As well as film musicals, many of the girls were fans of stage musicals such as *Billy Elliot*, *Les Misérables* and *Wicked*. They enjoyed listening to cast recordings of these shows, and some of the girls had been taken to see musicals performed live at the theatre. Several of the participants (who were members of drama groups) had themselves taken part in productions of stage musicals, and this experience had instilled in them an interest in musical theatre and an appreciation of the music of these shows.

Television was also a major part of the girls’ lives, and much of the television they watched was music-based. In particular, they enjoyed watching television talent shows, such as *The X Factor* (2004 to date), *The Voice* (2012 to date) and *Britain’s Got Talent* (2007 to date), all of which revolve around performances of popular music. In general, these shows focus primarily on singers, although *Britain’s Got Talent* also sometimes features dancers and other musical acts. The girls discussed these programmes a great deal during the research, expressing admiration for some of the contestants, and ridiculing others. Most of all, they seemed to enjoy the theatre

and spectacle of television talent shows; they frequently discussed the behaviour of the judges (many of whom were themselves famous pop stars), and they enjoyed recounting stories of embarrassing auditions and altercations between judges and contestants.

Some of the girls watched music television channels, such as Kerrang!, which mainly broadcast music videos. They also watched children's television channels, such as the Disney Channel, Nickelodeon and CBBC. Many of them watched (or used to watch) the children's television series *Hannah Montana* (2006–2011), an American musical comedy starring pop singer Miley Cyrus. They also watched other American “tween” comedies, such as *Sam & Cat* (2013–2014), *Liv and Maddie* (2013–2017), *Girl Meets World* (2014–2017) and *Dog with a Blog* (2012–2015). In addition, many of the girls watched television programmes intended for an adult audience, including soap operas (e.g. *EastEnders*), sitcoms (e.g. *Benidorm*), adult cartoons (e.g. *South Park*) and other programmes (e.g. *Top Gear*).

The girls in my study were keen internet users. Not only did the internet provide a way for them to access music, it also offered them the opportunity to immerse themselves in the online culture surrounding popular music, providing them with a platform to share their thoughts and opinions. Furthermore, the internet allowed the girls to bond with other likeminded people through online fan communities.

For some of the girls, social networking was an important part of their lives, and many of them had accounts with social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat and Vine (despite the fact that many of these platforms have age restrictions which are supposed to prevent children from using them). However, while these platforms were generally very popular amongst the participants, some of them did not use social media. There were a variety of reasons for this: some had parents who would not allow them to use social networks, and some of the girls themselves felt that social media was addictive, harmful and dangerous, having heard stories about online bullying and grooming. For most of the girls though, social media was a useful tool which helped them to engage with and participate in popular culture.

In many ways, the rise of the internet and social media has led to a more participatory, communal popular culture (Jenkins, 2006a, 2006b). Viewers of television talent shows and major pop cultural events (such as the Eurovision Song Contest) are encouraged to vote online for their favourite acts, and to “tweet along” using official hashtags. The internet has also given fans the opportunity to become media creators, and this has led to an explosion of “textual productivity” (Fiske, 1992, p. 39), with individuals producing and circulating fan-made content (including fan videos, artwork and fan fiction) on sites such as YouTube and Tumblr. In the

internet age, almost anyone can produce and publish their own audiovisual content on YouTube, and this has widened the creative scope of music video, opening the door to innovative amateur producers seeking to reinterpret music videos and extend the boundaries of the form (Vernallis, 2013).

This trend is epitomised by the rise of online parody videos which send up popular music videos. These parodies were very popular amongst the participants, who enjoyed watching *The Key of Awesome* (a comedy YouTube channel run by writer and producer Mark Douglas) and the videos of Bart Baker (a comedian famous for his YouTube parodies). Some of the girls watched fan-made dance tutorials on YouTube, in order to learn the dance routines of their favourite pop songs. A few of them also created their own online content; one participant used Tumblr to blog anonymously about music, while another had made YouTube videos of herself singing along to karaoke versions of pop songs (albeit with her face covered to hide her identity). Both of these girls stated that they had chosen to remain anonymous in order to protect themselves from ridicule, bullying and online abuse.

The rise of social media has also profoundly altered the relationship between pop stars and fans, breaking down the aura of “distance” which surrounded many celebrities in the pre-internet era. For musicians and performers, social networks provide a useful way for them to market themselves and promote their work. Many stars use social media to court their online fanbase, posting messages of encouragement and appreciation to make their fans feel valued (L. Bennett, 2014a; Click, Lee, & Holladay, 2013). Celebrities also often use social media to broadcast their personal opinions and share photographs and videos of their everyday lives. This offers fans an insight into the supposedly “private” life of the star, generating a sense of immediacy and intimacy (L. Bennett, 2014a, 2014b; Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Many stars run their own social media accounts and some choose to interact directly with their fans, for example, by “liking” or replying to comments on Facebook, or by retweeting fans’ tweets on Twitter. This offers fans a chance (or the promise of a chance) to interact directly with their idols, something which was out of reach to most fans in the pre-internet age. Some of the girls in my study described using social media to (in the words of one participant) “stalk” their favourite stars. For example, one of the girls mentioned that she had used the “direct message” function on Twitter to contact a member of a boy band, noting that, to her delight, he had replied to her message (albeit only to tell her not to contact him again).

In general, the girls were deeply interested in the private lives of pop stars and other celebrities. They used a range of different media to access information about stars, including websites, social media sites, gossip magazines like *Heat* and television programmes about the lives of the

rich and famous. Several of the girls mentioned that they would be awe-struck if they met a celebrity, regardless of whether or not they liked that particular star.

If I met [One Direction], even though I don't like them, I'd probably ask for their autograph or something ... or if I saw The Vamps and I'd just seen a picture of them, even if I didn't know who they were, I'd just [say] "oh, I'm your biggest fan!" (Susie)

Equally, those who *had* seen or met celebrities in "real life" were often extremely proud of having done so, and they seemed to enjoy sharing these experiences. Overall, the girls seemed very impressed by fame, and their discussions suggest a keen engagement with celebrity culture.

As shown throughout this chapter, the girls were active participants in a complex and interactive multimedia landscape, involving a wide range of digital and online media. Their engagement with music was both personal and social, playing a central role in their everyday lives and relationships. Rather than viewing popular music as a distinct pop cultural medium, they saw all forms of popular media as interlinked and connected, recalling Vernallis's (2013) notion of the contemporary "media swirl": "its accelerating aesthetics, mingled media, and memes that cross to and fro" (p. 3). In the following analysis, I look more deeply at the girls' engagement with music within the context of this media swirl, focusing primarily on their beliefs about musical value and the exercise of judgement.

4 Interpreting the Materials of Music

“You’re not ... listening to the image, you’re listening to the music”

During the focus groups and interviews, the participants frequently discussed the content of popular music, or the musical materials. This included sonic and musical content, lyrical content and the visual content of music videos. Discussing these musical materials, the girls reflected on issues of musical value, meaning and structure. In this chapter, I explore these issues in depth, considering how the girls’ beliefs about music were shaped by the music’s material properties.

4.1 Musical autonomy

During their discussions, the girls often talked about musical sound. It was clear that their opinions about musical sound played an important role in their musical judgements. To explain their musical preferences, they frequently referred to musical factors such as instrumentation, tempo, melody, vocal timbre and rhythm (which they usually referred to as the “beat” of the music).

Well, to be honest, I like a lot of music, as long as it’s got a good beat, and a good rhythm, and a good tune. (Violet)

There’s a song I really like called “Lose Yourself” [by Eminem]. It’s good ‘cause it starts off with like (singing) “doo, doo, doo,” like quite slow, and then it goes (singing) “dum, dum, dum, dum, dum, dum.” It’s like, it’s got a really good beat. (Violet)

You know that song “Bang Bang”? I think that’s a great mix ... it’s *so* good. It’s got such a good sound. (Imogen)

I like the Bollywood music ... I like the nice beats what it’s got to it and ... the trumpets and everything of it because it’s just so good. (Nadia)

I think when [songs] have like catchy tunes as well. Like in that “Wake Me Up” song [by Avicii], when they have that bit in the middle. It’s quite cool. (Emma)

I like Ariana Grande ... [her music’s] just got that beat ... and I like, erm, AC/DC. ‘Cause they’ve just [got] that ... beat and just that ... that guitar. (Nicole)

Equally, they sometimes referred to musical sound when describing why they did not like certain kinds of music.

I don’t really like rock music ... with the like air guitars and electric guitars and things like that, I don’t really like. And drumming. (Leanne)

I don't like opera though. I'm not a big fan of opera. 'Cause it's like high-pitched.
(Pippa)

Throughout their discussions, the girls stressed the importance of musical sound, expressing a firm belief that music should be judged solely on its sonic properties, rather than on its extra-musical characteristics. In particular, they felt that music should not be judged according to its visual properties, which they referred to as "image". They expressed this idea in deeply moralistic terms, invoking a hierarchical distinction between sound and image. Within this dichotomy, sound was understood to be intrinsically valuable, while image was seen as trivial and distracting.

I don't personally ... think [image is] that important because you're not going to be listening to the image, you're listening to the music ... I don't really pay ... tend to pay a lot of attention to that. (Amelia)

I like their music, [it's] not about what they look like really. (Lily)

It's like not [about] what they look like, it's how they sound like. (Leanne)

Well, I don't think it really matters what you look like ... 'cause you might just hear someone on the radio and you don't know what they look like. So, even if they have a good voice, it doesn't really matter how good they look or how bad they look. (Imogen)

These responses invoke the idea of musical autonomy, a central concept within the Western art music tradition (Clarke, 2005; Goehr, 1992; Green, 1988). The term musical autonomy refers to the idea that musical value is contained within the material (or sonic) properties of a piece of music (Clarke, 2005, pp. 126–132; Cusick, 1999, pp. 481–482; Frith, 1996, p. 18). Scholars such as Burnham (1997) and Cusick (1999) use the phrase "the music itself" to refer to music that is seen as autonomous. The reflexivity of this phrase illustrates the central idea underlying this ideology: that music is a self-sufficient system of meaning which refers only to itself, rather than to the external world (Clarke, 2005). Musical autonomy thereby asserts the intrinsic value of music, constructing music as a mysterious, transcendent phenomenon which is divorced from the material realm.

The concept of musical autonomy derives from the ideals of the German aesthetic movement of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Goehr, 1992; Woodford, 2015). Kant's *Critique of Judgement* (1790/2007) laid the groundwork for this idea, arguing that the aesthetic value of an artistic work lies not in its ability to perform a function, but in its essential form (or "beauty"). At the time, this represented a major shift in thinking. Prior to the late-eighteenth century, music was largely seen as functional, and was used primarily as an accompaniment to social events, festivals and religious ceremonies (Goehr, 1992, p. 178). Around the turn of the nineteenth

century, music began to be seen as valuable in its own right, and it became fashionable to see musical works as “objects possessing an independent existence of their own and that should be judged and appreciated for their own sakes, for their beauty, and not for any extra-musical associations” (Woodford, 2015, p. 286). Since then, the concept of musical autonomy has proved remarkably enduring, and it has come to shape contemporary beliefs about music (Clarke, 2005; Cusick, 1999). Although the idea of autonomous music remains associated with the Western art music tradition, it has also come to influence a range of other musical styles and traditions, including popular and non-Western musics (Frith, 1996; Goehr, 1992; Gracyk, 1999).

Musical autonomy acts as a regulatory concept which designates musical value and guards the boundaries between “good” and “bad” music. Ultimately, it serves to differentiate between “absolute music” (Chua, 1999) which is seen as aesthetically valuable, and “functional” music which is thought to lack aesthetic value (Frith, 1996, p. 18); as Bourdieu observes, the category of highbrow culture is governed by an aesthetic sensibility which asserts “the primacy of form over function” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 172). Within the art music tradition, absolute music is seen as separate from the mundane and messy conditions of everyday life, and is thought to refer only to itself; it is therefore understood as “inherently” valuable and is coded as a “highbrow” form of music. Although the girls generally did not talk about art music, they nevertheless made use of these ideas, stressing the importance of musical sound. By doing so, they aligned themselves with the idea of autonomous “absolute” music.

4.2 Attentive listening

The idea of musical autonomy also shaped the participants’ beliefs about listening. In their focus group discussion, Imogen, Erin and Daisy discussed how they listened to music, advocating a specific style of listening which they felt offered a deeper, more meaningful musical experience than other listening styles.

Daisy: I quite like the new song ... “Amnesia” by 5 Seconds of Summer ... I just kinda like it, and it makes me want to just sort of sit down and listen to that continuously all day.

Erin: Yeah, I like songs where you can sit down and just listen to them and appreciate them. I don’t like songs where you feel like you’ve got to do something whilst listening to it.

Imogen: Like dancing.

Erin: I like it where you feel like you've listened to something and you've done something.

Imogen: You've done something good.

Erin: Rather than you're like, you've got to do something whilst doing it.

In this extract, the girls describe a style of focused, contemplative listening characterised by a deep attentiveness to musical sound (I refer to this throughout my work as "attentive listening"). This listening style is described as "submissive listening" by Kramer (1995, p. 65), "musical listening" by Gaver (1993, p. 1) and "concentrated listening" by Clarke (2005, p. 136).

According to the girls, this style of listening required a calm, disciplined physical stance; as Erin explained, one must "sit down and just listen" to the music. This echoes Clarke's description of concentrated listening: "this 'particular form' of listening is silent, stationary, uninterrupted, ears glued to the musical structure and eyes closed" (p. 136). This stance lends itself to the practice of attentive listening, minimising distractions and allowing the listener to concentrate intently on the sound of the music.

The girls described attentive listening as an active process, a focused activity in its own right: "I like it where you feel like you've listened to something and you've done something" (Erin). In contrast, they saw other styles of musical engagement as more passive, such as the use of music as an accompaniment to other activities (such as dancing): "I don't like songs where you feel like you've got to do something whilst listening to it" (Erin). Again, this invokes a distinction between autonomous music and functional music. The act of listening is therefore mapped on to this dichotomy: attentive listening is associated with musical autonomy, while other styles of engagement are associated with functionality and are assumed to be more passive.

It is clear from the extract above that these participants associated attentive listening with certain kinds of music. In other words, they felt that certain musical styles invited attentiveness from the listener, whereas others invited different – less attentive – styles of engagement. Their discussions indicate a belief that music has the power to induce certain listening states: "it makes me want to just sort of sit down and listen to that continuously" (Daisy). This reflects Clarke's (2005) assertion that music elicits certain responses from listeners depending on its characteristics, a point which echoes Johnston's (1985, p. 245) work on film. Imogen elaborated on this idea in her one-to-one interview, arguing that Adele's music invited attentive listening.

I think she just likes to sing rather than ... actually perform an act. Like, I don't know how she'd probably present if she was in front of ... [an] audience ... I don't know how she'd do it, she'd probably just sing. So I think she's just one of those people you'd just rather listen to rather than watch the videos. (Imogen)

Here, Imogen suggests that Adele's music invites the listener to concentrate on the musical sound: "I think she's just one of those people you'd just rather listen to". Specifically, she implies that Adele's music elicits an attentive response because of its focus on the voice. Indeed, in terms of her public image, Adele is presented first and foremost as a vocalist. Her music centres around her voice, which tends to be positioned at the foreground of the mix and is presented as the main point of identification for the listener (Dibben, 2014, p. 119). It also tends to include many extended vocal notes, particularly at the ends of phrases, and this draws attention to her voice as a vehicle for emotional expression (Edgar, 2014, p. 173).

In the quotation above, Imogen contrasts Adele's music with the work of other stars who employ a more performative aesthetic (or who, as she describes it, "perform an act"), suggesting that this performative aesthetic encourages the audience to "watch the videos" rather than listen attentively. She presents these stars in opposition to Adele, whose performances tend to be more restrained, understated and subdued, both in terms of their visual aesthetic and their tone or mood.

This suggests that, for Imogen, Adele's music was associated with sound, whereas other, more visually-oriented, performers were associated with image. Arguably, this distinction amounts to a value judgement. By aligning Adele's music with the notion of sound, Imogen presented it as autonomous music with its own inherent value. She also drew a distinction between two styles of musical engagement: listening and watching. Because of its association with autonomous music, Imogen positioned listening as more sophisticated than watching. In this way, Imogen used the idea of attentive listening to assert the value of Adele's music, emphasising her ability to recognise this value.

Clarke (2005) notes that listening practices are a product of specific cultural contexts, and that they reflect broader ideological approaches to music. The practice of attentive listening emerged alongside the concept of musical autonomy around the turn of the nineteenth century, following significant changes in the way that music was produced, performed and valued (Goehr, 1992). One such change was the emergence of new freedoms for artists, and this had a profound impact on the relationship between composers and listeners. Liberated from the constraints of the patronage model, composers began to be treated as independent artists with control over their work (Goehr, 1992, p. 207). As composers began to gain more power, listeners took on a more subordinate role which required them to submit themselves to the music by listening attentively in passive contemplation (Kramer, 1995). To accommodate this shift in thinking, concert halls were built with attentive listening in mind, and concert programmes were adapted to encourage the practice (Goehr, 1992, pp. 236–237). During the nineteenth century, composers and critics

advocated attentive listening as an ideal listening style and, since then, the practice has been actively promoted to students by music teachers and educationalists (Woodford, 2015). As a result, attentive listening has taken on a powerful role within musical culture. Even today, attentive listening is generally assumed to be the “correct” way to engage with music, particularly “serious” music (Frith, 1996, p. 125), and this idea continues to hold sway within contemporary popular culture (Clarke, 2005, p. 136).

As such, attentive listening cannot be separated from the idea of absolute music, since the very act of listening attentively serves to reinforce the notion of musical autonomy (Frith, 1996, p. 125). By listening attentively, it is assumed that listeners can access the intrinsic value of the music through an appreciation of aesthetic form. It is therefore believed that this particular style of listening facilitates a deeper, more meaningful engagement with music than other, less focused, listening styles (Clarke, 2005; Goehr, 1992; Kramer, 1995; Levinson, 2015).

This idea is encapsulated by Erin’s suggestion that she liked songs “where you can sit down and just listen to them and appreciate them”. Notably, the word “appreciate” is associated with the aesthetic sensibility; in order to properly appreciate music, it is generally assumed that one must possess a certain level of musical knowledge and cultural competence. By appreciating music, individuals are assumed to experience “aesthetic satisfaction” (Levinson, 2015, p. 21). Aesthetic satisfaction is constructed as a “higher” response to music than the sensuous pleasure that is supposedly elicited through other, more “functional”, styles of musical engagement.

As I have shown, the girls were deeply invested in the discourse of musical autonomy, and they embodied this discourse through attentive listening. What, then, did the discourse of musical autonomy, and the associated practice of attentive listening, offer to the girls, and why did they emphasise these ideas so much during their discussions?

Arguably, the notion of musical autonomy offered the girls access to considerable prestige. As previously noted, musical autonomy is central to the Western classical tradition and, as a result, it is associated with art music and the concept of art more generally. This discourse of musical autonomy echoes the ideals of nineteenth-century Romantic ideology, which positioned art as an autonomous mode of expression, which should be valued for its aesthetic form, rather than its function (Goehr, 1992). Interestingly, the participants used this discourse to evaluate mainstream pop music, a style that is generally considered a form of “low” culture. Furthermore, by listening attentively to pop music, they were engaging with a form of “low” culture in a manner more associated with “high” culture. By doing this, the girls conferred value on to pop music, elevating it above its low status.

It is unlikely that the girls did this knowingly, or that they were consciously attempting to elevate their own tastes. Rather, the girls' use of these discourses probably reflects their prevalence within contemporary culture; indeed, as I have noted, the concept of musical autonomy remains deeply embedded within popular consciousness. As Frith (1996) and Gracyk (1999) observe, academics and critics often evaluate popular music according to the standards of Western art music, applying frameworks of value which draw on traditional aesthetic approaches, and which are therefore not necessarily suited to popular styles. My research shows that young female listeners also apply these discourses to popular music, and this demonstrates the continued significance of Romantic ideals for popular audiences; despite major changes in the way that music is produced, performed and distributed, Romantic discourses remain firmly embedded in the popular psyche (Frith, 1986; Greckel, 1979; Mayhew, 1999; Negus, 2011). My research shows these discourses at work within a contemporary context, demonstrating the various ways that girls use them to designate musical value, prestige and status, even when discussing a style of music that is generally not associated with these qualities.

4.3 Lyrics, music video and narrative structure

The girls generally located musical meaning within the lyrical content of the music. They discussed song lyrics a great deal during the focus groups and interviews, and it was clear that they looked to the lyrics to gain a deeper understanding of a song's meaning.

This focus on lyrics is demonstrated in the following quotation from my interview with Amelia. In it, Amelia stresses the importance of song lyrics, stating that she disliked Nicki Minaj's song "Anaconda" (2014) because she was unable to hear the lyrics.

Amelia: ... for example "Anaconda", I don't really like listening to it.

Bridget: You don't like the song?

Amelia: No.

Bridget: Do you ... what do you think of it? Like, why not?

Amelia: Annoying. 'Cause there's like different words. And like you don't have enough time to understand the meaning 'cause it's just like boom, boom, boom, boom!

Here, Amelia suggests that, because she could not properly hear the lyrics, she was unable to access the "meaning" of the song "Anaconda". Specifically, she suggested that this was due to the song's fast tempo ("you don't have enough time to understand the meaning") and the loud,

percussive sound of the music (“it’s just like boom, boom, boom, boom!”). This description of “Anaconda” is fairly accurate. At 130 beats per minute, the song has a relatively fast tempo, and this is emphasised by Nicki Minaj’s fast-paced rapping. It also has a busy, multi-layered texture featuring synthesised percussive sounds and sound effects, such as a whip cracking, a school bell and turntable scratches. In terms of vocal sounds, it features electronic vocal effects (such as echo) and a range of extra-musical sounds, including speech, laughter and throat sounds. It also contains a hook sampled from the 1992 hit “Baby Got Back” by Sir Mix-a-Lot. Overall, Amelia argued that these musical features distracted attention away from the lyrics and, in some cases, made them inaudible to the listener.

This emphasis on lyrics is unsurprising, given the status of lyrics within popular music culture. D. Griffiths (2003) notes that lyrics are “the single most consistent element of pop songs” (p. 42) and, because of this, they are generally considered to be highly meaningful. Throughout the history of popular music, musicians, songwriters and producers have stressed the value of song lyrics and, since the 1960s, artists have provided printed lyrics inside record sleeves, so that listeners are able to read them, learn them, interpret them and sing along with the recording (D. Griffiths, 2003). With the growth of the internet, lyrics have become even more accessible, with thousands of websites offering accurate transcriptions of song lyrics. Although the significance of lyrics has been much debated by scholars of popular music (Astor & Negus, 2014; Middleton, 2000), there is little doubt that lyrics are immensely meaningful to many people, including music journalists, critics, musicians and listeners, and that they remain “central to how pop songs are heard and evaluated” (Frith, 1996, p. 159). Research into children’s musical engagement has shown that young people are deeply interested in the lyrical content of pop songs (Roberts & Christenson, 2001), and that their beliefs about lyrics influence their musical judgements (Bosacki et al., 2006). My research builds on the findings of these studies, showing that girls are very concerned about song lyrics, and that they view them as the primary vehicle for musical meaning.

Much like their preoccupation with musical sound, the girls’ interest in lyrics reflects the ideals of Romanticism. D. Griffiths (2003) explores the development of contemporary attitudes towards lyrics, arguing that the current emphasis on song lyrics derives from 1960s rock culture and the work of “poet” songwriters such as Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell and Paul Simon. By drawing on the conventions of classic balladry, Romantic verse and beat poetry, these performers took on the role of the poet, drawing on the Romantic construction of the artistic genius (Frith, 1996). This association with poetry, an established “high” cultural form, serves to “validate” popular music as a form of “art” (Shuker, 2005, p. 157). In a sense then, the girls’

belief in the significance of lyrics can be traced back to Romantic ideology and the construction of art as a meaningful – and highly valuable – concept (Goehr, 1992).

The girls also sometimes located meaning within the visual content of music videos, and consequently they talked about these videos a great deal. Often these discussions focused on the relationship between the lyrics of a song and the visual content of its video. Amelia, for example, felt that watching music videos helped her to “understand” the music better.

I think like, if, if I've listened to a piece of music and then I've watched the video, I feel like I understand the music a bit more, which helps me like to understand why they're singing. (Amelia)

Other scholars studying young people's engagement with popular music, such as Sun and Lull (1986) and Roe and Löfgren (1988), have noted that children watch music videos to gain a better understanding of the lyrics of songs. Roe and Löfgren suggest that, for young listeners, engaging with the “visual narration” of music videos may “enhance the impact of the lyrics, perhaps by increasing perception of their meaning” (p. 311). Notably, these studies were carried out during the first “golden age of music video” (Shaviro, 2017, p. 5) and, as such, these scholars view music videos primarily as a promotional accompaniment to pop songs.

My research offers contemporary insight into this issue, showing that, even within today's dynamic multimedia culture, audiences continue to link music videos with song lyrics. The above quotation from Amelia's interview provides evidence of this, demonstrating the participants' audiovisual approach to popular culture. Amelia makes an explicit link between lyrical and visual meaning in popular music, assuming a degree of concurrence between these two sources of meaning; by understanding the visual content of a music video, she felt that she would be able to gain a better understanding of the performer's intended meaning (or, in her words, “why they're singing”). Crucially, it was the lyrics that Amelia found most meaningful, and she looked to music videos to inform her interpretation of the lyrical content of pop songs, rather than vice versa. This arguably reflects the conventions of contemporary audiovisual culture, in which musical and visual content are closely intertwined (Korsgaard, 2017; Vernallis, 2013).

Some of the participants had very rigid expectations about how music videos should communicate meaning, and the structural conventions that they should follow. Chloe, for example, compared two Taylor Swift videos, “Shake It Off” (2014) and “Love Story” (2009). These videos follow very different structural conventions. Chloe was aware of this, and she expressed a preference for “Love Story” because of its simple narrative structure. In contrast, she disliked “Shake It Off” because she felt it lacked a coherent structure.

Bridget: What do you think of the video [for “Shake It Off”], have you seen it?

Chloe: It’s quite weird. It doesn’t really make much sense. The dancing.

Bridget: Yeah. What’s wrong with it?

Chloe: I dunno. It’s just, it’s got no background and stuff and the story doesn’t make sense either. I loved the one called “Love Story” because it’s got like a story and I like ... watching the video. I used to always watch the video because she was like, in like, in really nice dresses and when I was younger I used to like all the like ball gown dresses and stuff, and I liked watching that, and then I liked the princesses and stuff, because it had a story. And I just still think it’s nice.

This discussion reveals some of Chloe’s assumptions about music videos. Her suggestion that “the story” of “Shake It Off” “doesn’t make sense” probably refers to the fact that “Shake It Off” is a “nonnarrative” video (Vernallis, 2004) – in other words, it does not have a simple linear structure. In the video, Taylor Swift is shown in a number of different scenarios, performing in various dance styles, including hip hop, ballet and cheerleading. While the other dancers appear self-assured and confident, Taylor Swift dances awkwardly, conveying an impression of confusion and clumsiness. Towards the end of the video, she is shown performing the song as the lead singer of a band, and (in another scene) dancing informally with a group of teenagers. Aside from Taylor Swift, who seems to be playing an exaggerated caricature of herself, there are no obvious “characters” in the video and no linear plotlines. Although the video does include some features which create a sense of narrative structure, such as a feeling of progression, a build in tension and a climax, it is not a narrative video in the strict sense. Vernallis (2004) defines narrative music videos in an Aristotelean sense, as videos which feature clearly-defined characters with personalities, goals and agency, who – during the course of the video – overcome obstacles in the pursuit of change and transformation (p. 3).

In contrast, the video for “Love Story” presents a simple linear narrative. The video begins on a school or university campus, where Taylor Swift spots her love interest studying beneath a tree. The viewer is then transported to a period setting which draws on medieval, renaissance and regency imagery, borrowing many of the tropes of contemporary historical drama. The viewer is encouraged to view this romanticised scenario as a fantasy world, concocted in the imagination of the present-day Taylor Swift character. A romantic story plays out in this fantasy world: Taylor Swift meets a handsome stranger at a ball, the pair meet in secret, part unwillingly and are eventually reunited in an ecstatic embrace. This story has all the necessary components of a narrative video: clearly-defined characters (Taylor Swift and her male love interest), clear goals (the pursuit of romantic love) and a plot which sees the characters overcome obstacles to achieve these goals. It is also worth noting that the song and the video both contain references to

stories. Indeed, the title of the song contains the word “story”, and the lyrics make reference to Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, often described as one of the greatest love stories of all time. Furthermore, the lyrics and music video draw on a range of well-known narrative forms, such as fairy tales, costume dramas, American teen films and Disney princess films, all of which generally conform to a linear “story” format.

Overall, Chloe expressed a preference for music videos with a simple linear story structure. Moreover, she felt that music videos *should* have a linear narrative. In this way, her views echoed Amelia’s belief that the visual content of a music video should be linked with its musical and lyrical content. Chloe went further than this, suggesting that, rather than simply *representing* the lyrics of songs, music videos should literally *enact* them. This is interesting, given that only a fraction of music videos have a strict narrative structure; as Vernallis (2004) notes, “more generally, videos mimic the concerns of pop music, which tend to be a consideration of a topic rather than an enactment of it” (p. 3). This expectation may reflect the girls’ engagement with other texts aimed at children, such as children’s films, television shows and literature, all of which typically adhere to a strict linear narrative form. Traditional fairy tales, such as Cinderella, Little Red Riding Hood and Hansel and Gretel, are obvious examples of this. These stories feature clearly-structured narratives that are signposted to the reader or listener using stock phrases such as “once upon a time” and “they lived happily ever after”.

This preference for videos with a linear narrative structure may also reflect the way that children are educated about storytelling and creative writing, for example, in the context of school English lessons. Very often, children are taught that stories should have a clear linear structure which includes a beginning, a middle and an ending. The BBC Bitesize⁹ website exemplifies this approach, advising Key Stage 3¹⁰ students that short stories should have an “opening” which sets the scene and introduces the characters, a section of “plot development” which “builds the tension” and “keeps the reader absorbed”, a “climax” in which “the problem reaches a head”, and a “conclusion” (or “resolution”) which “must leave your reader with a sense of satisfaction” (“Creative or narrative writing,” n.d.).

As I have shown, the girls’ beliefs about lyrics, music video and narrative structure reveal some of their assumptions about popular music, showing how their expectations were shaped by their exposure to other cultural texts. Ultimately, the participants’ discussions illustrate the semantic limitations of their interpretative frameworks, highlighting the problems that they encountered

⁹ BBC Bitesize is an online study resource for UK schoolchildren, run by the BBC.

¹⁰ Key Stage 3 refers to the three years of schooling known as Year 7, Year 8 and Year 9 in England and Wales. Children in Key Stage 3 are between the ages of 11 and 14.

when they tried to use these frameworks to draw meaning from popular music. In this way, my research offers an insight into the ways that girls are enculturated, and sometimes explicitly *taught*, to interpret musical texts, demonstrating the profound influence that this has on their wider understanding of popular music.

4.4 Locating the “meaning” of music

Often, the participants discussed the meaning of music, focusing particularly on the lyrical subject matter of pop songs. In this section, I explore the girls’ opinions about this, considering how they understood “meaning” in music and how this influenced their musical judgements.

Many of the girls argued that music should be meaningful, and they expressed a preference for songs with a clear “meaning”.

I like [One Direction’s] songs ‘cause like ... [they] all have a meaning to them.
(Pippa)

They used this word to refer to a specific type of meaning, which was also sometimes referred to as a “message”. As explained in the previous section, the girls generally located musical meaning within the lyrics of songs and, ideally, they felt that lyrics should convey information clearly and unambiguously. Their discussions reveal an essentialist approach to musical meaning; they did not acknowledge the role of subjectivity in the interpretation of music, or the fact that people experience musical meaning in different ways. Instead, they felt that all songs had one “true” message, which was placed into the music by the songwriter or performer. This assumption reflects the widespread belief that music is “motivated, authored, and intentionally created” (Negus, 2011, p. 607) by an individual artist, an idea which mirrors the Romantic notion of the individual autonomous genius (DeNora, 1995).

Some of the girls expressed a preference for music with an explicitly moral message. In particular, they liked songs which communicated a message about how people should behave and treat others. Sophie, for example, liked the Beyoncé song “If I Were a Boy” (2009) for this reason.

Bridget: Do you like Beyoncé at all?

Sophie: Yeah, I find her music quite inspirational.

Bridget: Do you? Yeah.

Sophie: ‘Cause she has quite a few messages in the music.

Bridget: What, like, do you think?

Sophie: ... Like in her song “If I Were a Boy” ... it’s like saying that like you should like treat a girl like you would treat yourself. Or like be nice to her.

“If I Were a Boy” is sung from the perspective of a jilted woman who imagines herself as a man, and this lyrical device is used to highlight the ways that men sometimes mistreat women in romantic relationships. The music video reflects the lyrics, presenting a role reversal scenario. In it, Beyoncé switches places with her on-screen male love interest, taking on the stereotypical masculine role in the relationship. Throughout the video, Beyoncé is portrayed as the more confident partner, who takes her lover for granted while enjoying the attention of other men. Through this role reversal, both the song and the music video present a moral argument about how people should treat others; as Sophie explained, “it’s like saying that like you should like treat a girl like you would treat yourself.”

Songs that offer guidance, wisdom or common-sense advice to the listener were also viewed as meaningful.

“Live While We’re Young” is like saying like don’t waste your time being young, like, ‘cause it’ll never happen again, and stuff like that ... like live it ... live it for fun. (Pippa)

Here, Pippa expresses a preference for songs which offer advice about how best to live one’s life. The song “Live While We’re Young” (2012) by One Direction can be interpreted as both a love song and an exuberant song about youth, which calls on young people to seize the day. Although it does not contain an explicitly *moral* message, it nonetheless conveys ideas about how people should behave.

In this way, the girls’ discussions reveal a preference for music with a didactic message. This arguably reflects the conventions of children’s media and culture more widely. Children’s literature, for example, has long been used to transmit knowledge, guidance and moral values to children (Mills, 2014, p. 1). This discourse of didacticism continues to dominate children’s media, and films and television shows aimed at children often feature messages about the importance of being kind to others, and of valuing friends and family. It is possible, then, that the girls in my study may have been influenced by other forms of popular culture, and this may explain why they expected popular music to mirror this didactic tone.

The girls also had strong opinions about songs that they felt lacked meaning. For instance, some of the girls dismissed songs which dealt with subjects such as socialising, partying and romantic relationships. Jenny, for example, criticised One Direction's music for this reason.

[One Direction's] lyrics aren't particularly like inspiring and they don't have like a proper message other than, like ... "ooh, I'm gonna go and kiss this girl and go to a party" and things like that, you know. (Jenny)

Lauren expressed similar views, arguing that she disliked songs about relationships and breakups.

Obviously the target audience [for 5 Seconds of Summer] are, like, young girls so they ... they sort of just sing about, like, stuff that [girls] would wanna listen to, like about, like, how good-looking people are and stuff. (Lauren)

I think when all bands are ... like, people are singing about, like, how good-looking people are and like about, like, heartbreak and stuff, it just gets a bit annoying. Like Taylor Swift. She annoys me a lot. (Lauren)

It's like every single song [by Taylor Swift] is just either she's got a ... new boyfriend or she's just broken up. So, it's like, I dunno ... it just annoys me. Like, a load. (Lauren)

It is clear from these quotations that, for Jenny and Lauren, music was a serious business. Consequently, they felt that supposedly "light" or "fun" topics, such as romance and partying, had no place in popular music. Jenny and Lauren's preference for "serious" music conveyed an ethical position: the belief that stories about people's everyday lives and relationships are somehow trivial and insignificant.

It is interesting that they identified these topics as trivial, given that popular music (particularly mainstream pop) often focuses on these themes. Historically, popular music has been understood as the music of the masses, and pop songs very often focus on the concerns of ordinary people, particularly interpersonal relationships. This subject matter is widely considered to be one of the defining features of popular music (Tagg, 1982).

Jenny and Lauren's rejection of supposedly "trivial" music may indicate a desire, on their part, to distance themselves from music that they saw as embarrassing and culturally worthless. This reflects the widely-held belief that "high" art should go beyond mundane or material matters, and that it should be more than just frivolous entertainment (Keightley, 2001). Goehr (1992) calls this the "separability principle" (p. 157), referring to the idea that art belongs to the transcendent or spiritual realm, and that it is divorced from worldly concerns. As Goehr argues, the separability principle is closely bound up with Romantic ideology, and the concept of separability works to maintain the value of supposedly autonomous music (p. 167). Many of the

participants (including Jenny and Lauren) subscribed to the view that music should focus on weighty issues. This perhaps explains why they preferred music which dealt with issues of morality, since they considered this to be a serious topic that was worthy of artistic reflection. As such, the girls challenged the idea that pop music is the music of “leisure”, asserting the value of pop music as a serious art form.

It is worth noting that Jenny and Lauren were both fans of rock music. Keightley (2001) notes that, within rock culture, the notion of “seriousness” works to perpetuate the hierarchical distinction between pop music (which is coded as “low” culture) and rock music (which is understood, within this framework, as a form of “high” culture). Within this dichotomy, rock is seen as serious, whereas pop is seen as “soft”, “safe” and “trivial” (Keightley, 2001, p. 109): “seriousness is the defining feature of rock, which must always be seen to be engaging with something ‘more’ than just pleasure or fun” (Keightley, 2001, p. 129). This aura of seriousness helps maintain rock’s supremacy over pop music, relegating pop to the bottom of the popular music hierarchy.

This distinction functions as a gendered dichotomy which constructs rock music as serious and masculine in relation to pop music, which is seen as trivial and feminine (Keightley, 2001, p. 117). Media products aimed at girls are often concerned with interpersonal relationships, leisure activities and consumption, focusing on activities such as shopping and having fun with friends. These themes are culturally associated with a specific brand of commodified, hyper-feminised girlhood. Baker (2001) notes that, because of this subject matter, pop music is often assumed to have little value (p. 363). Ultimately, the denigration of supposedly “feminine” concerns serves to perpetuate misogynistic attitudes, devaluing the experiences and interests of women and girls.

It is notable that Lauren singled out Taylor Swift for particular criticism. Throughout her career Taylor Swift has consistently portrayed herself as an “all-American girl next door” (A. Brown, 2012, pp. 161–162), embodying a highly feminised public persona which plays on the iconography of white, Western, heterosexual girlhood. In the media, she has been widely criticised for her relationships with various high-profile male celebrities (such as Harry Styles, Calvin Harris, Tom Hiddleston and Jake Gyllenhaal) and, within this media coverage, she has consistently been portrayed as “boy crazy”, obsessive, dishonest and manipulative, characteristics which play on misogynistic stereotypes (Carpenter, 2013; Dabiero, 2017; Morris, 2016; Valle, 2016). The girls in my study seemed aware of this coverage, and this had clearly influenced their opinion of her.

It was clear from their discussions that the girls saw “feminine” or “girly” subject matter as trivial. Indeed, Lauren stated this explicitly, arguing that 5 Seconds of Summer’s music was trivial because it was aimed at “young girls” who, in her words, only wanted to listen to songs about “how good-looking people are”. By attributing a specifically feminine sensibility to these fans, Lauren cast doubt on their ability to evaluate music, and this implicitly undermined the band’s credibility. This reflects Railton and Watson’s (2011) observation that performers with an overwhelmingly female audience are generally not taken as seriously as performers with a predominantly male audience, and that the music of these performers tends to be denigrated and dismissed (p. 75).

The girls’ use of these gendered discourses suggests an attempt to appropriate the prestige of traditionally “masculine” styles, such as rock, which are seen as serious and valuable. It also shows that the girls wanted to distance themselves from the trappings of girlhood, and from the denigration and subordination that is imposed on girls. By taking up a discourse of masculine seriousness, they appropriated the prestige of supposedly “serious” musical styles, thereby elevating their own status as listeners.

5 Constructing the Self

“You should be yourself and be who you are”

This chapter focuses on the participants’ beliefs about the self. It was clear from their discussions that they were preoccupied with the issue of selfhood; sometimes it was discussed in depth, while at other times it was mentioned in passing (for example, when they were talking about other things). In this chapter, I shed light on the girls’ understanding of the concept of self, and their beliefs about how the self is constructed, how individuals should perform selfhood, and how the concept of the self fits into wider society. I also situate the girls’ ideas about the self within a broader ideological framework, considering the specific social and historical context in which these ideas operate.

5.1 The authentic self

The participants felt it was very important for performers to present a realistic or honest version of themselves through their work. In general, they preferred music which they felt expressed the inner thoughts, feelings and values of the performer.

I think [Ed Sheeran is] a genuine person. And I think that really speaks through his music, so I like him. (Holly)

I think [Jessie J’s] quite inspiring because her songs *mean*. So when I listen to her songs, it feels like it actually, like, it’s happened to you, so you can actually feel like ... she actually gets her word across when she actually sings ... that’s what I like about her. (Imogen)

In the quotation above, Imogen suggests that music should express the performer’s emotions, highlighting the process of mediation which occurs when emotions are communicated to an audience: “she actually gets her word across when she actually sings”. By communicating emotions effectively, Imogen argued that music could induce feelings of empathy in the listener, encouraging them to imagine themselves in the same situation as the performer: “it feels like it actually, like, it’s happened to you”.

Some of the girls took the idea of emotional honesty extremely literally, arguing that performers should sing about their own personal experiences. Molly, for example, preferred music that was autobiographical.

I think it's also from past experiences that I think Sam Smith ... has had, which might make it more stronger and [bring] more affection to the song. (Molly)

I think [Ariana Grande] ... even though she's like 21, there's some that are younger than that, there's enough time for some break-ups and ... past experiences. Because I think past experiences ... bring out, like, the most in your voice and better lyrics than just making it up in your head. (Molly)

When engaging with music by a particular performer, the girls drew on their knowledge of the star. This knowledge was gleaned from a range of different official and unofficial sources, including television, the internet and word of mouth. They considered performers authentic if their artistic output reflected their broader "star image" (Dyer, 2004, p. 7). Interestingly, the girls seemed to view the performer as the musical originator. This contradicts the widespread belief within popular music that the songwriter is the musical originator (Negus, 2011, p. 610); in general, the participants were uninterested in who had written their favourite songs, and they rarely discussed composers or songwriters. This may reflect the girls' preference for mainstream pop, since within pop music there is generally more emphasis on the performer than the songwriter.

Overall, these quotations demonstrate the participants' firmly-held belief that music should be "authentic". Authenticity is a central concept within popular music. As Shuker (2005) argues, the idea of musical authenticity carries "considerable symbolic value" (p. 17), while Thornton (1995) notes that authenticity is one of the most valuable qualities that can be attributed to music (p. 49). In order to seem authentic, music must convey the impression of being "real", "raw", "honest" or "original". Within the popular sphere, the notion of authenticity is rarely interrogated and, as a result, it retains an enigmatic quality which increases its symbolic power. Beliefs about authenticity play a key role in the taste distinctions of popular listeners (Frith, 1996, p. 71; Keightley, 2001, p. 131; Leach, 2001, p. 143). As Frith (1986) notes, "good music" is typically seen as "honest and sincere", while "bad music" is seen as "false" (p. 267). These distinctions serve to designate value, and certain musical genres are widely considered to be more authentic than others; for example, rock music is typically characterised as an authentic style, while pop music is generally considered to be inauthentic (Hawkins, 2011; Keightley, 2001; Moore, 2002).

Following a flurry of academic debate about musical authenticity in the 1990s and early 2000s, scholars reached an agreement that authenticity is culturally constructed; in other words, it is a quality which audiences "ascribe to a performance" (Rubidge, 1996, p. 219) rather than an inherent musical property (Keightley, 2001; Moore, 2002). As a result, most scholars regard the concept of authenticity as somewhat problematic, and the term has largely been relegated "to

the intellectual dust-heap” (Born & Hesmondhalgh, 2000, p. 30). Indeed, Middleton (2006) argues that, within scholarship, the idea of authenticity has “become an embarrassment” (p. 203).

This approach is not without its problems, particularly since the concept of musical authenticity remains so important to popular audiences. Authenticity is frequently invoked by musicians, critics and music fans, and one need only flick through a music magazine, glance at the online comments on a music video or watch a television talent show to see that people’s attitudes towards popular music are still profoundly shaped by the idea of authenticity.

Moore’s (2002) analysis of musical authenticity provides a useful framework to understand this concept, and I use this framework to make sense of the girls’ discussions of authenticity. Notably, the girls’ responses recall Moore’s notion of “first person authenticity” (p. 211). According to Moore, first person authenticity is based on the idea that authentic music conveys an essential truth about the music’s originator; as Moore states, first person authenticity “arises when an originator ... succeeds in conveying the impression that his/her utterance is one of integrity” (p. 214). In order to create this impression, music must seem to embody the thoughts, feelings and experiences of the originator, as if to say “this is what it’s like to be me” (p. 212).

As shown in the quotations at the beginning of this chapter, the girls subscribed to a highly specific version of first person authenticity based on the idea that music is a form of emotional communication which expresses the performer’s inner self. As such, their understanding of authenticity was remarkably literal. In order for music to be authentic, they felt it had to reflect the real-life experiences of the performer, and they sought evidence that these experiences were genuine. Using this information, they drew parallels between the performer’s music and his or her private life, confirming Meyers’s (2009) assertion that “the blurring of the private/public distinction that occurs in celebrity media is essential for the maintenance of ... star power” (p. 892). In many ways, this reflects the girls’ moral approach to the interpretation of cultural works, which was based primarily around ideas of truthfulness.

This notion of first person authenticity is based on the idea of intrinsic selfhood: the belief that everyone has an inner self, or “essence”. Crucially, the girls saw the self as a stable, fixed entity, and consequently they preferred stars whose image had stayed largely the same.

I think Adele is a very real person. I think she’s not been changed by fame, which you can’t say about many celebrities. (Dorothy)

There are loads of people that've like, they get famous and they, like, change and stuff, and I think [Jake Bugg's] gonna be one of the people that are like, "I'm not changing, like, I will wear joggy bottoms and stuff." (Lauren)

Conversely, they were extremely critical of performers who they felt had changed in some way, particularly if their appearance or demeanour had changed.

I don't really like [Ariana Grande's] image. I used to like it but now I don't really like it because when she played in this, erm ... Disney ... film, she was like nice and sweet then. But now she's, erm, changed into a different person ... her voice is very good but she's just changed into a very different person. (Selma)

I think [Miley Cyrus] was a lot more of herself ... like before she changed ... but now she just like ... I think she's gone a bit over the top, and she like ... she's not like ... got her own personality. She just doesn't really fit ... (Imogen)

In these quotations, Selma and Imogen discuss Ariana Grande and Miley Cyrus, two pop stars who had recently undergone a transformation from child star to "grown-up", sexualised pop star. Both Selma and Imogen lamented the fact that these stars had "changed", with Selma noting that Ariana Grande had become, in her eyes, a "different person". Imogen's discussion of Miley Cyrus illustrates this idea of stable selfhood. It was clear that she regarded Miley Cyrus's new image as somehow less authentic than her earlier, more childlike image, which she felt embodied Miley Cyrus's "true" self: "she was a lot more of herself ... like before she changed". Other researchers investigating girls' attitudes towards identity have made similar observations; for example, Baker (2001), Bloustien (2003) and Currie et al. (2009) all report that the girls who took part in their studies believed in an essential inner self or, as Bhabha (1994) describes it, a "*real Me*" (p. 70).

The idea of a stable, intrinsic self draws on the notion of the soul, a central concept within Western culture. Ultimately, the concept of the soul relies on the belief that a person's essence is somehow separate from his or her material body.

In the emergence of a modern society, the "soul" ... came to refer to the localization of all psychic functions within a "body-in-space" ... The soul is inside the body but is distinct from the body, and at the same time the soul registers and responds to the outside world, including its own body. (Ferguson, 2000, p. 87)

This idea can be traced as far back as ancient Greece. In *Phaedo*, Plato muses on the soul, suggesting that all humans possess an immortal soul that is imprisoned within the body (R. Martin & Barresi, 2000, pp. 2–3). The Platonic notion of the transcendent soul was, in large part, compatible with early Christian thought (R. Martin & Barresi, 2000, p. 6), since it mirrored the central distinction within Christian theology: the separation between the mortal, material body and the immortal, immaterial soul. In his influential work on dualism, Descartes famously

addressed the separation of body and soul, arguing that human existence relies on two distinct elements: mind and matter. Following the Enlightenment, the soul retained its cultural significance, and the concept continued to shape beliefs about the self in the modern era (Ferguson, 2000; R. Martin & Barresi, 2000).

The cataclysmic political upheaval of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries led to considerable changes to the way in which the self was understood and conceptualised. Social transformation swept through Europe, culminating in the French Revolution, and the advent of industrialisation led to the restructuring of society, which became increasingly concentrated around large urban centres. With these changes came burgeoning anxiety about the role of the individual in society and increasing tension between notions of individuality and communality (Moggach, 2016, p. 661).

The Romantic movement offered a solution to this problem: the Romantic self (Ferguson, 2000, p. 89). Unlike the religious soul (which was understood to be constructed through acts of faith, piety and morality) the Romantic self was defined by deeply-felt emotions and beliefs, which were thought to emanate directly from the inner being of the individual.

Romantic selfhood, thereafter, was construed as a struggle for the gradual (or not so gradual) release of the soul's authentic tendencies from those stultifying conventions beneath which it was presumed to lie, hidden but fully formed. The soul was literally buried underneath the self. (Ferguson, 2000, p. 94)

In this way, the Romantic self offered an alternative to the conventional bourgeois respectability of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries by offering individuals a "deeper" experience of selfhood (Ferguson, 2000, p. 91). Romanticism introduced the idea that individuals should express the self, designating art as the ideal medium for this expression. In many ways, Moore's (2002) notion of first person authenticity recalls the idea of Romantic selfhood, since it is based around the idea that art is a form of self-expression. By invoking the notion of first person authenticity, then, the participants in my study promoted a specifically Romantic version of selfhood.

It is notable that the girls used celebrity culture to explore ideas of selfhood, since the notion of celebrity is itself bound up with the idea of the authentic self. Celebrity culture is very much a product of the Romantic era; the figure of the celebrity emerged in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries following the rise of the mass media and the development of a consumer economy which democratised mass culture, making it easier for people to distribute and access information and images (Esterhammer, 2016; Mole, 2007). Celebrity culture embodies the Romantic ideal of the intrinsic self (the "real me"), promoting a discourse of authenticity which

focuses on the private or personal lives of stars (Meyers, 2009). In order to market the self as a commodity, celebrities must promote a unique or interesting version of themselves to a mass audience.

Celebrity is [seen as] a positive force for the good because it represents the power of the individual based on characteristics that are unique to that person alone... Accordingly, it is said that each celebrity today has something that is distinctively “theirs” – you do not even need talent, but simply recognition for what you “are”. Essentially, you are famous for yourself. (Evans, 2005, p. 15)

As such, the celebrity is a deeply individualistic construct, which is based around the idea of the authentic individual (Dyer, 1991, 2004).

5.2 “Being yourself”

Through their discussions, the participants reproduced the idea of Romantic self-expression, with many of them stressing the importance of “being yourself”. This phrase was something of a slogan for the girls, who used it to refer to a supposedly authentic style of behaviour and performance.

[Ed Sheeran’s] got a nice voice and he’s himself as well, he doesn’t like ... make him be anyone else, he just plays his music and goes along with it. (Imogen)

[Jessie J and Adele] like, be who they are and ... have their own personality ... Miley Cyrus doesn’t really do that, I don’t think. (Imogen)

[Nicki Minaj] just be herself and stuff. (Rochelle)

They also stressed the importance of being yourself in more general terms, framing the act of self-expression as a moral imperative.

People don’t like you to be fake, they’ll want you to be yourself. (Summer)

I think a lot of people when they first become famous are, like, trying too hard to be a role model, and then they give up and I think people should just, I know it sounds cheesy, but be themselves and people might like them more. (Dorothy)

I think [the video for “Wrecking Ball” by Miley Cyrus is] trying to tell [girls] just to be whoever they want to be and change, and really you should be yourself and be who you are, not someone who you want to be. (Imogen)

Imogen’s choice of language evokes the idea of intrinsic selfhood. She constructs the inner self as a stable entity, distinguishing this from the subjective experience of being in the world (consciousness) and the ability of individuals to act upon the world (agency). Her suggestion

that “you should ... be who you are” implies a belief that it is possible to be something other than “who you are”, indicating a perceived disconnect between the essential self and the social performance of selfhood. Her language emphasises agency, and she describes the act of self-expression as a conscious choice: an individual can choose to literally *be*, or embody, the self (“you should ... *be* who you *are*”, emphasis my own). According to this reasoning, the self is something which people can choose to either accept or reject.

The instruction to “be yourself” is often directed at children, usually in an attempt to build confidence and self-esteem, and this message is frequently promoted in films, television programmes, books and songs aimed at children. Notably, Girlguiding recently adopted a similar message as part of the Guide promise (a vow taken by all girls who join the Guides). Originally, prospective Guides had to promise “to love my God, to serve my Queen and my country”; however, in 2013, the reference to God was removed from the promise, and was replaced by a promise to “be true to myself and develop my beliefs” (“God vow dropped from Girlguiding UK promise,” 2013, para. 4). Discussing this change, Chief Guide Gill Slocombe explained that the new promise was intended to make the Guides more welcoming to girls “of all faiths and none” (“God vow dropped from Girlguiding UK promise,” 2013, para. 9). It is, however, interesting that, in order to foster a more inclusive, secular environment, Girlguiding has chosen to replace a religious sentiment with a celebration of individualistic self-expression.

In general, the girls felt that performers were authentic if they presented themselves as “different”, “unique” or “original”, and this particularly applied to performers with a flamboyant or distinctive physical appearance.

[Lady Gaga is] unique and she’s not afraid to be different. (Jo)

See, I quite like [Lady Gaga] because I think she’s true to herself and she’s quite outgoing, and I like how she doesn’t try to be ... normal, how I think she’s a bit outrageous, but in a way that sort of suits her, ‘cause that makes her unique. And I watched her on *The Paul O’Grady Show* once, and she was saying how, when she was younger ... people always used to bully her for being different. (Holly)

[Katy Perry’s] got, like, her own character and no-one can, like, really copy her. (Felicity)

Crucially, the girls believed that acts of self-expression should go against the grain, flouting normative conventions and disrupting the social order. Because of this, they admired performers who provoked disapproval or criticism, and many of the girls stressed the importance of disregarding other people’s opinions.

[One Direction have] just been a great inspiration since my sister started liking them ... and I just think ... they're just their-self [*sic*]. They do do some silly stuff quite a lot, but they're just their-self and they don't listen to what other people say about them, they just get on with their life. (Clare)

[Miley Cyrus and Lady Gaga] care what people say. But Beyoncé, she don't care what people say. She's cares what ... she thinks about herself. (Zara)

[Beyoncé's] not bothered about what people think, she just, she's just herself. (Summer)

Many of the girls admired Lady Gaga, in particular, for her controversial image and performance style because they felt she was "being herself". They made much of the criticism directed at her, and they praised her for ignoring negative comments and media coverage. The following extract demonstrates this. In it, Jenny, Lauren, Nora and Lily discuss Lady Gaga's infamous "meat dress", a dress made from raw beef which she wore to the 2010 MTV Video Music Awards. The girls felt that, by wearing this dress, Lady Gaga was asserting her individuality by refusing to pander to mainstream standards of taste.

Lauren: Lady Gaga? I quite like her, she's like insane, isn't she?

Lily: Crazy.

Jenny: She is pretty cool to be honest ... but I think, I think people think about, like, the meat dress and stuff like that ... too much. You know.

Nora: Yeah.

Lily: Oh yeah.

Lauren: I think like everyone, like, yeah, they always go on about the meat dress and stuff, and then they're always like, I think everyone's sorta like, "oh, what she did was like, a rebellion", sorta thing, but then I don't think it actually was ... I think it's just her being a bit insane.

Jenny: She was just like, "yeah, whatever, I wanna wear this."

Nora: Yeah, like she doesn't care what people think about her.

Lauren: I like her. For that.

Jenny: I, I think that's like ... like a pretty good message for people, like not to care what other people think and stuff like that.

The ideas expressed in this extract indicate an aggressive form of individualism which positions the individual in opposition to society. Within this world-view, individuals are rewarded for contravening social norms, and for ruthlessly pursuing their goals and ambitions without considering the impact on wider society. This discourse constructs society as an oppressive force which seeks to constrain and curtail the freedoms of individuals.

Amelia took this idea further, arguing that individuals have a right to express themselves in whatever way they choose.

So I think, even though I don't like [Miley Cyrus's] image, I think she has the right to choose what examples she's going to set. (Amelia)

I wouldn't say [Miley Cyrus's image is] fine, but I think every person has a right. So it's a bit like a goth. So people might discriminate them, or say that, oh, they look ... they're not a proper human being, and might bully them because they like black. So it's a bit like Miley Cyrus. Maybe she just likes to be nude. (Amelia)

In these quotations, Amelia invokes the notion of personal autonomy. Ultimately, she felt that, so long as people had control over their choices, all forms of self-expression were permissible. She viewed these acts of self-expression in isolation and did not link them with external factors, such as social pressures or conventions. Rather than considering the various cultural factors which might have influenced the development of Miley Cyrus's sexualised image, Amelia felt that Miley Cyrus might simply be trying to express herself through her clothing choices, suggesting that she might "just [like] to be nude". To emphasise the importance of personal autonomy, Amelia appropriated the language of human rights discourse, describing self-expression as a "right" and suggesting that individuals who disapproved of people's personal choices were guilty of "discrimination". Her use of this serious, official-sounding language lent weight and credence to her views, helping to legitimise this discourse of aggressive individualism.

Within the context of a media-saturated capitalist culture, individuals are taught to see themselves first and foremost as consumers, and it is assumed that people's consumer practices, material belongings and leisure pursuits convey information about their personality and moral values. Personal autonomy is equated with consumer choice, and self-expression is enacted through the display of consumer goods. Selfhood is therefore constituted through an engagement with cultural images and commodities (Cronin, 2000). It is notable, then, that the girls' discussions of self-expression focused mainly on the clothing worn by performers, and it was clear that they regarded fashion as a form of self-expression. It is also notable that some of the girls saw self-expression as a "right", linking it with ideas of freedom and autonomy. Scholars such as Cronin (2000), T. Miller (1993) and Skeggs (2004) note that the politicisation of identity has led to a discourse of commodified individuality which positions self-expression as a right. Similarly, Murdock (1992) argues that, in a media-dominated culture, access to media images and cultural products is seen as a right which should always be respected.

Through their discussions, the girls described this process of "self-fashioning" (Ferguson, 2000, pp. 87–88) as a conscious task, which could be accomplished through the act of consumer

choice. This notion of choice is positioned as a necessary ideal of contemporary culture (Rose, 1998; Strathern, 1992). Within this culture, individuals are expected to actively “choose” a self (Budgeon, 2003). Although the idea of choice is presented as liberating, Cronin (2000) argues that it ultimately serves to constrain individuals; in order to construct legitimate, socially-acceptable selves, individuals must select from a range of available identities, performing “compulsory individuality”. The girls in my study seemed to understand selfhood in this way, using consumer goods and cultural images to encode information about the self. This in turn informed their understanding of other people’s self-presentation, including pop stars and celebrities, since they saw the display of consumer goods (such as clothing and accessories) as a form of self-expression.

5.3 Accommodating individualism

Because of this individualistic world-view, the participants viewed society as diverse, rather than cohesive. They generally saw individuals as unique, emphasising the differences between people, rather than the similarities.

Bridget: Do you listen to the same music as your friends, or do you sort of not agree about music, or do you all like the same things?

Erin: I suppose some things we agree on, some things we don’t. Like I listen to One Direction. I was ... in that group discussion ... none of the others like them. I, I like them, and that’s my opinion so ...

Bridget: ... But you feel okay to express your opinions about music?

Erin: Yeah, it, it doesn’t matter. If they don’t like it then they’re not really your friends, are they?

Bridget: Yeah, I suppose not ...

Erin: Yeah, I mean, obviously we’re not all gonna like the same things ... we’re all different, so ... I don’t mind if they like something and I don’t, and they don’t mind if I like something and they don’t.

In this excerpt, Erin characterises her friendship group as diverse: “obviously we’re not all gonna like the same things ... we’re all different”. This indicates a belief that society is fragmented, and that individuals are distinct and separate. To deal with this perceived lack of social cohesion, Erin advocated a tolerant approach to difference: “I don’t mind if they like something and I don’t, and they don’t mind if I like something and they don’t.” She clearly felt that tolerance could be used to ease interpersonal tensions, preventing discord within social

groups. Many of the girls echoed this view, arguing that it was important to be tolerant of other people's musical tastes.

On the bus and things, on the way to school, I'll like give my friend an earphone or something, and we'll listen to the same. But sometimes I'll just keep it to myself 'cause not everyone likes the same music I like and things. And I have to respect that. (Fiona)

I used to try and get my friends into, like, say One Direction and The Vamps and that. But now I just think, if they don't want to, that's absolutely fine ... 'cause I might have different emotions to different type of songs to what they do, and that's what I want to respect. (Molly)

We have this other friend at school and she likes I guess what you'd call more emo music than we do. Like, she's ... she likes the same things, but she likes other things as well ... and she's like "oh hey, listen to this", and I mean, it's not, it's not my thing, but you know, if she likes that then I'm fine with that. (Jenny)

As shown above, the girls frequently stressed the importance of respecting people's beliefs and personal boundaries – for instance, they felt it would be unfair to force other people to listen to their music. This sentiment was part of a wider discourse of tolerance; since they believed that individuals were essentially unique and disparate, they felt that difference should be accepted and tolerated as much as possible. Ultimately, their discussions suggest a belief that people should not have to conform to social norms or expectations. Instead, they felt it was the responsibility of society to accommodate the behaviour of individuals, however unconventional.

The girls' focus on tolerance, and their use of words such as "rights" and "discrimination", suggests that they may have received some form of education in diversity, equality and inclusion. Nowadays, many UK schools offer awareness-raising workshops addressing issues such as racism, sexism and homophobia. These initiatives usually intend to inform children about their rights, teaching them to treat others fairly and compassionately, while respecting people's differences and boundaries.

Such initiatives are often led by charities and campaign groups with an interest in advancing the rights of disadvantaged social groups. Within popular discourse, members of such groups are often described as having a shared "identity". This particular understanding of identity has become central to contemporary liberal (or "progressive") political discourse, following the advances of identity-focused liberation movements, such as the civil rights movement, the women's movement and the gay rights movement. Because of this focus on identity, the ideals promoted by these movements are sometimes referred to as "identity politics" (Alcoff, Hames-García, Mohanty, & Moya, 2006; Nicholson & Seidman, 1995). Identity politics has been an important force for change, promoting the rights of marginalised and disenfranchised people.

The politics of identity has nonetheless faced considerable criticism from across the political spectrum and, as Alcoff and Mohanty (2006) point out, identity politics has been characterised by some as a divisive, individualistic ideology. Consequently, the term identity politics has become somewhat tarnished, and is now often applied disparagingly, as a form of ridicule. There are, however, some valid concerns about the way in which this ideology conceptualises the experience of selfhood, dislocating individuals from wider social structures. By focusing on the differences between individuals, rather than on group cohesion, identity politics overlooks the possibility of collective action, instead promoting a personalised form of resistance based on individual acts of subversion. Overall, identity politics presents little challenge to normative discourses of selfhood. Indeed, the very notion of identity relies on the belief that individuals have a fixed essence which does not shift or change over the life course. In this way, the notion of identity recalls the concept of the soul. Identity politics therefore fails to acknowledge the constructedness of identity, or the fact that identity is experienced by individuals in very different ways (Butler, 1990; Lloyd, 2005; Phelan, 1995).

Discourses of identity are best viewed in context, and it is important to remember that the concept of identity (as it is understood today) has emerged within an individualistic consumer culture in which the self is a valuable commodity. By focusing on diversity and difference, rather than on togetherness and commonality, campaigners and educators arguably contribute to a wider discourse of individualism, promoting the view that society is a fragmented cluster of disparate individuals. Consequently, the notion of identity leaves girls without the language or tools to conceptualise their experiences as active participants within a broader social structure, and they are instead encouraged to view themselves as isolated individuals. Despite this, the participants in my study took up this discourse enthusiastically, using the idea of identity as a vehicle to explore notions of self-expression, morality, authenticity and creativity. For the girls, this discourse offered a way to make sense of their experiences of *being* in the world.

Ultimately, then, the idea of a fixed, intrinsic self lay at the centre of the girls' discussions, underpinning their world-view and their sense of self-narrative.

5.4 Working on the self

As explained above, the participants had very specific ideas about how people should behave, and these ideas were closely bound up with their moral values and their deep-rooted beliefs about the self. For the girls, the notion of the ideal self was linked with their beliefs about work. In general, they preferred performers who were seen as hard-working, and they criticised those who they felt did not put sufficient "effort" into their music.

... also like their backgrounds, what they did ... like have improved on their music and vocals and then they've grown to be this kind of ... well-known person. Erm, and that's what I quite like to look up to. (Molly)

I don't think [One Direction and Rihanna] put as much effort in their music than Jessie J would. I think that ... they just sing it, and they don't really put a lot of effort into making them sound good. (Imogen)

Their discussions demonstrate a belief in the moral value of hard work. The girls felt that musicians should have a strong work ethic, and that they should demonstrate qualities such as tenacity, perseverance and determination. Not only did they link these qualities with musical ability, they also believed that they were a sign of good moral character.

The "rise to fame" narrative was a common theme of the girls' discussions, and they enjoyed telling stories about how certain performers had become famous and successful. These stories offered an avenue for them to explore the idea of work more generally. For example, Holly told the story of Justin Bieber's rise to fame, describing him as a highly driven, dedicated individual who had worked hard to build his career.

Teenagers, especially these days, just want to go on *The X Factor* and they're like, "I wanna be a singer", and it's not as easy as that, you have to work your way up, like ... (sighs) oh, this might be a bad example, but Justin Bieber ... Justin Bieber didn't go on a talent show, Justin Bieber started busking outside and he, er, worked his way up then and he got spotted and then look where he is today. (Holly)

Dorothy expressed similar opinions, describing Ed Sheeran as a hard-working performer who had started from nothing, working his way up gradually through the music business.

You, if you walk in somewhere and you've got something about you and the record label goes "oh, that's okay!" So, like, you've got to start from the bottom ... though it doesn't always work out, but I think you start from the bottom and you go and you sing a song and they think "well, they're a bit different" and they can book a few small things for them. After that you get bigger and bigger and, like, maybe the whole town knows you, then the whole city and then your area and when you get a new record label but ... if you go somewhere and you're a normal person and you sing ... I think with Ed Sheeran, 'cause he's a fairly new pop star, with Ed Sheeran they thought "here's, here's a new gap in the market" ... (Dorothy)

In these two quotations, Holly and Dorothy describe a romanticised "rags-to-riches" narrative. Ideally, they felt that musicians should persevere tirelessly and selflessly for their art, promoting their music for little or no financial gain (for example, by busking) and relying on word-of-mouth recommendations and the unlikely prospect of getting "spotted" by a music industry professional.

Lauren echoed these views in her discussion of the boy band 5 Seconds of Summer.

[5 Seconds of Summer] did the tour with One Direction ... and that sorta just made them become popular automatically. But if they had to work for it more, I think they would probably be, like, better. (Lauren)

She clearly felt that 5 Seconds of Summer had benefitted from an association with One Direction (a more established boy band) and that, because of this, the band members had not had to work as hard as other musicians. Lauren argued that, by touring with One Direction, 5 Seconds of Summer had gained an unfair advantage over other bands, suggesting that the group had become famous “automatically”. In particular, she seemed to disapprove of performers who had had a “leg-up” in the music business, instrumentalising their connections with other industry professionals. This belief influenced her view of 5 Seconds of Summer, since she felt that the group would have been better if the band members had “had to work for it more”.

In particular, the girls criticised performers who had found fame on television talent shows, contrasting this with the idealised rags-to-riches narratives that they promoted throughout their discussions. Dorothy, for example, felt very strongly about this, arguing that television talent shows offered a way for performers to achieve fame and fortune without putting in as much effort as other performers.

You can go on *X Factor*. But to be honest I think that’s a cheat, cheap way of making celebrities. (Dorothy)

I think maybe it’s effort, part of it’s effort, but I think sometimes ... sometimes effort’s absolutely nothing to do with it. As I said before, I think *X Factor* is a cheat. (Dorothy)

Dorothy clearly felt that pop stars who found fame on *The X Factor* were less deserving of success than other performers. Appearing on *The X Factor* was, she felt, a “cheat” which allowed aspiring musicians to circumvent the necessary work required to craft a successful music career. This belief might seem counter-intuitive, especially since television talent shows typically show contestants working hard on their performances, attending rehearsals and practising their singing. However, Dorothy’s objection to *The X Factor* seemed to be largely ideological, relating to her deeply-held beliefs about the moral value of work. She did not feel that these competitions were meritocratic, and consequently she did not believe that the winners were exceptionally skilled or talented. In essence then, Dorothy felt that television talent shows were inauthentic because, in her eyes, they did not fulfil their intended purpose (that of a music competition). Instead, she regarded them as a phenomenon of celebrity culture whose primary purpose was to entertain an audience, rather than reward the most accomplished performer; in her own words, she saw *The X Factor* as just a “cheap way of making celebrities”.

Dorothy's opinions reflect widely-held beliefs about television talent shows, which are frequently expressed in the popular press. As a form of reality television, these shows are typically associated with celebrity culture, and they are often derided as narcissistic, fame-obsessed and trivial (Holmes, 2004). Often, television talent shows are assumed to be inauthentic because they intentionally create stars, and it is assumed that contestants on these shows are merely "famous for being famous" rather than for their skill or accomplishments, an idea which recalls Boorstin's (1961) suggestion that celebrities are "known primarily for their well-knownness" (p. 74). Because of this, the music of these stars tends to be characterised as "manufactured" pop music, a label that is widely understood to refer to the "most inauthentic music" (Moore, 2002, p. 220). The term manufactured typically refers to performers or groups who have been intentionally groomed by music industry professionals, and the figure of the manufactured pop star is an enduring trope within popular culture. Some so-called manufactured pop stars are entertainers in a broader sense, and many have also been television performers; for example, famous manufactured groups such as The Monkees and S Club 7 started life as fictional pop groups, starring in television programmes aimed at children. As such, manufactured pop music is broadly associated with very young audiences, and with an upbeat, light-hearted style of music and performance which does not take itself too seriously.

To an extent, Dorothy's beliefs about television talent shows could be interpreted as a critique of the music industry, since she clearly felt that the authenticity of music was corrupted by the influence of the music and entertainment industries, and by commercialism more generally. In this way, her views reproduce the dichotomy of art versus commerce, an idea which has an enormous influence on how people understand and value popular music (Grossberg, 1992; Moore, 2002). Within this dichotomy, the artistic process is assumed to be pure, transcendent and mystical, and it is assumed that this perceived purity is corrupted by the influence of commercialism (Negus, 1995). Shuker (2005) defines commercialism as "the general influence of business principles and practices upon social life, including leisure activities" which involves "the commodification of cultural commodities and symbolic goods; i.e. their production as material commodities for a market consumer economy" (p. 46). Music which is seen as "commercial" is generally viewed as inauthentic and trivial, in contrast with supposedly "non-commercial" music, which is seen as more authentic and serious (Shuker, 2003).

The idea that art is corrupted by commercialism has its roots in Romanticism (Shuker, 2003, 2005). More specifically, this idea derives from the musical culture of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when music began to be viewed as an art form with intrinsic value, rather than as a functional commodity (Goehr, 1992, p. 206). This discourse continues to shape contemporary attitudes towards art, and plays a significant role within popular music culture

(Pillsbury, 2006, p. 137; Shuker, 2003, p. 180, 2017, p. 68), having been kept alive within the folk and rock movements of the twentieth century (Moore, 2002). Within rock culture, the dichotomy of art versus commerce has been hugely significant, and has typically been used to distinguish between “authentic” rock, which is seen as a legitimate art form, and “inauthentic” pop, which is seen as an inferior form of mass culture (Keightley, 2001). Rock musicians, in particular, have sought to distance themselves from commercialism, and those who openly pursue commercial interests have been accused of “selling out”, an idea which continues to carry considerable weight amongst popular audiences (Pillsbury, 2006, pp. 136–137).

In recent decades, this discourse has proved difficult to uphold (Shuker, 2003, p. 181). Since all popular music is a commodity, the notion that rock music is somehow non-commercial has become problematic (Moore, 2002; Walser, 1993). Instead, today’s audiences are more concerned with the way in which performers negotiate their relationship with the music industry, and whether they appear to accept, subvert or resist discourses of commercialism (Moore, 2002, p. 218). Dorothy, for example, felt that it was important for performers to somehow signal a rejection of commercialism through their work. This had very little to do with whether their music was *actually* a commodity; instead, it had more to do with the perceived attitude of performers and the way in which they presented themselves (in other words, their “star persona”).

This discourse of anti-commercialism fits comfortably alongside the girls’ wider beliefs about music. Together, these beliefs represent a Romantic approach to music, revolving around the notion of musical authenticity. The girls saw music as a form of art (in the Romantic sense) which had intrinsic value. Consequently, they were deeply concerned about the influence of corrupting forces (such as commercialism) which were seen to degrade music, damaging its perceived artistic value.

Overall, the quotations included at the beginning of this section reveal idealistic, and somewhat naïve, beliefs about fame, celebrity culture and the music industry. Through their discussions, the girls idealised the narrative of the “organic” or “natural” rise to fame, which is achieved independently through sheer dedication and hard work. For the participants, this narrative represented an authentic, morally legitimate route to fame and success. This moralistic stance is arguably problematic, since it does not reflect the reality of the music industry; indeed, it is likely that all of the performers mentioned by the girls will have worked very hard to carve out their music careers, and that they will have received some form of assistance (financial or otherwise) from other musicians, music labels, organisations and companies. Nevertheless, the

girls used this individualistic narrative to emphasise the importance of independence and self-reliance, stressing that individuals are personally responsible for their lives.

The participants' discussions about work revolved around the concept of agency: the capacity of individuals to act within a given context. The girls felt that agency was enacted through work, particularly when this work led to the accumulation of social and economic capital. Underlying their "rags-to-riches" stories was a discourse of growth, change and transformation. The girls admired musicians who had elevated themselves, rising above their humble origins, hence their belief that all musicians should "start from the bottom" and "work [their] way up". They saw musical work as an active process, stressing the *process* of acquiring skills and the *process* of building a career. For the girls, then, being a musician was not a static identity, but rather a constantly changing process of self-construction and self-improvement. This focus on transition and change may well reflect the age of the participants, and the way in which girls are taught to understand the experience of adolescent girlhood; as explained in the introduction, adolescence (particularly female adolescence) is constructed as a time of development, when individuals are expected to carry out "identity work" to forge subjective adult selves, in a self-conscious "reflexive project of the self" (Giddens, 1991, p. 5). As I have demonstrated, the girls drew on this discourse of development and transition to make sense of the self, constructing a version of selfhood based on self-work and self-improvement.

5.5 The neoliberal self

Throughout this chapter, I have shown how the participants perpetuated a deeply individualistic ideology, situating the self in opposition to society. I have also shown that they believed in the existence of an authentic self, and that they felt that individuals have a moral responsibility to express themselves. Furthermore, their understanding of self-expression was heavily influenced by consumer culture, and they saw commodified self-expression as a right which should be accommodated at all costs. They also felt that the self was the product of hard work, arguing that individuals must strive actively and consciously to construct socially-valued selves. In the following section, I consider these beliefs together, arguing that, through their discussions, the girls promoted a specifically neoliberal version of selfhood.

The term neoliberalism is used to describe the current dominant model of free-market capitalism. This economic model emerged in the second half of the twentieth century, during the Thatcher-Reagan era (Peck, 2010). Put simply, the word neoliberalism refers to a political economy based around the liberation of the individual (Harvey, 2005). In Britain, the rise of

neoliberalism marked a rejection of post-war Keynesian economics and the prevailing Fordist model of mass production (Walkerdine et al., 2001). This was replaced by financial deregulation, global free trade and a faith in market determinism (Luxton, 2010). With the decline of primary industry and mass manufacturing came a new and rapidly-expanding service sector offering low-paid, insecure casual employment (Currie et al., 2009, pp. 17–18; Luxton, 2010; Walby, 1997). At the same time, fiscal austerity led to the erosion of the public sector and the privatisation of vital services which had previously protected society's most vulnerable and disadvantaged people (Walkerdine et al., 2001). Overall, neoliberalism has proved remarkably enduring, and the ideology remained largely unchallenged until the financial crash of 2008. Ultimately, the dominance of neoliberalism has led to an increasingly monopolised economic landscape, with rising levels of economic inequality (Harvey, 2005).

Since its inception, the neoliberal project has been accompanied by an aggressive discourse of individualism (Beck, 1992; Currie et al., 2009; Harvey, 2005; Peck, 2010). This discourse maintains that individuals are responsible for constructing successful selves, in order to navigate a precarious economic landscape and an unstable employment market (Harris, 2004a; Rose, 1999; Walkerdine et al., 2001). Individuals who fail to do this are often judged very harshly, since it is assumed that they are responsible for their circumstances (Walkerdine et al., 2001). As I have shown, the participants in my study actively promoted this idea throughout their discussions, for example, by arguing that musicians and performers should “start from the bottom” and “work their way up”. The girls saw the music industry as a microcosm of wider society, and they used discussions about the music industry as a vehicle to express neoliberal values.

This neoliberal discourse of personal responsibility and self-construction serves to reinforce the notion of the autonomous self, which is “flexible, individualized, resilient, self-driven, and self-made” (Harris, 2004a, p. 16). Giddens (1991) identifies the autonomous self as the central concept within modernity, arguing that the self has become a “reflexive project”, which “consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives,” and which “takes place in the context of multiple choice as filtered through abstract systems” (p. 5). The successful neoliberal self must therefore demonstrate an awareness of its own interiority whilst engaging in a reflexive project of self-construction (Cronin, 2000; Lash & Urry, 1994). As Harris (2004a) explains, this discourse shifts the burden of moral responsibility away from governments, corporations and institutions, instead placing it squarely on the shoulders of the individual. By doing so, neoliberal individualism works to uphold an economic system characterised by instability, uncertainty and risk.

The new focus on enterprise, economic rationalism, and individualization has social as well as economic effects. These include a sense of change, insecurity, fragmentation, and discontinuity within communities and nations, as well as a new emphasis on the responsibilities of individuals. Economic rationalism has been accompanied by a shift to a new brand of competitive individualism, whereby people are expected to create their own chances and make the best of their lives. (Harris, 2004a, p. 3)

This ideology is problematic, since it assumes that society is both just and meritocratic, despite considerable evidence to the contrary. Neoliberalism therefore assumes that, with the right market choices, anyone can achieve economic success, casting individuals as autonomous agents who are divorced from their external circumstances (Luxton, 2010; Ringrose, 2007). In this way, neoliberalism ignores the myriad external factors which influence people's life chances, such as upbringing, family background, language, ethnicity, education, sex and socio-economic status. By overlooking potential barriers to success and prosperity, neoliberalism maintains a pernicious discourse of market fairness which claims that, within a neoliberal society, people are duly rewarded for their hard work (Harvey, 2005). In her infamous 1987 interview with *Woman's Own*, Margaret Thatcher summarised this perspective and the moral reasoning behind it:

... who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families ... It is our duty to look after ourselves ... because there is no such thing as an entitlement unless someone has first met an obligation ... (Thatcher, quoted in "Interview for *Woman's Own*," n.d., para. 106)

Ultimately, then, neoliberalism perpetuates moralistic beliefs about work, asserting that hard-working individuals will naturally rise to the top. This reasoning explains why the participants disapproved of those who, they felt, had cheated the system or been given an unfair advantage over others. Instead, they believed that people should be entirely self-sufficient, taking control of their own destiny by working hard and developing themselves.

It is interesting that the girls used celebrity culture to explore the notion of selfhood. The figure of the celebrity bears a resemblance to the archetypal neoliberal self: the celebrity is both reflexive and self-conscious, engaging in a constant process of self-fashioning and self-branding. Celebrity culture celebrates individualism through stories of hard work and determination – stories which (as I have shown in this chapter) were told and retold by the girls throughout their discussions. In this way, celebrity culture conjures up an idealised image of the perfect neoliberal meritocracy, in which social mobility is achieved through active self-construction, an idea which invokes highly-prized values such as individuality, freedom, justice and fairness (Evans, 2005, pp. 14–15). Celebrities serve as icons of neoliberal selfhood, offering

an alluring “spectacle of individuality” (Marshall, 1997, p. 246), which helps maintain the illusion that society offers equal opportunities to all.

Neoliberalism has had a profound and far-reaching influence on the UK education system, and this may partly explain why the girls were so enculturated into this way of thinking. In recent decades, neoliberal ideology has been enthusiastically promoted by successive UK governments, including the New Labour government of the 1990s and early 2000s, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition of the early 2010s and subsequent Conservative governments. Politicians within these governments have used neoliberal discourse to justify a broad regime of educational reform, a shift which has been characterised by the widespread privatisation and corporatisation of primary, secondary, further and higher educational institutions (Rudd & Goodson, 2017; S. C. Ward, 2012). Neoliberal ideology has also found its way into the school curriculum, influencing how children are taught to understand their place in the world, and schools, colleges and universities are increasingly adopting an individualistic ideology of entrepreneurialism. Schools are under more pressure than ever to prepare children for an increasingly precarious and volatile employment market, and this has led to a focus on competition and individual academic success (K. Mitchell, 2003; Patrick, 2013; Peters, 2001). To facilitate this, educational rhetoric has become more individualised, promoting constant self-invention (Currie et al., 2009, p. 18), and students of all ages are encouraged to see themselves as “brands” to be marketed within a neoliberal economy (Gershon, 2011). The responsibility for this self-promotion lies squarely with the individual; young people are routinely encouraged to “sell themselves”, with schools and universities (and also sometimes services aimed at adult job-seekers) offering workshops on “self-marketing” and “personal branding” (Gershon, 2016; Vallas & Cummins, 2015; Van Oort, 2015).

Neoliberal discourse has also influenced self-help literature and resources aimed at girls, and again this may explain why my participants had taken up this discourse so enthusiastically. Since the 1990s, various initiatives have been launched to “empower” girls, educating them about personal and social issues including self-esteem, body image and interpersonal relationships. Gonick (2006), Harris (2004a) and J. V. Ward and Cooper Benjamin (2004) attribute this trend to the success of books such as *Making Connections* (Gilligan et al., 1990) and *Reviving Ophelia* (Pipher, 1994). These texts presented adolescence as a time of crisis for girls, arguing that adolescent girls are at risk of losing their selves. In response to this idea, educators, therapeutic workers and youth policymakers developed an individualistic approach to girls’ wellbeing and personal development, which focused primarily on “fixing the [individual] girl” rather than “fixing the culture” (J. V. Ward & Cooper Benjamin, 2004, p. 24). Harris argues that this has led to an Ophelia “industry” which enlists adults (including parents,

teachers, doctors and counsellors), and also sometimes girls themselves, in the surveillance and control of young women, who are constantly bombarded with self-help and self-improvement literature aiming to build confidence and resilience (p. 32). This approach to self-help puts the onus on the individual girl (and also sometimes her immediate family) to address complex problems, without addressing the many social, cultural and economic factors which play into these problems. Furthermore, self-help has come to replace other, more communal, forms of support. As a result, girls who struggle to conform to societal expectations often find themselves alienated from wider social structures, and these girls tend to be “marked as different from the norm and pathologized, criminalized, and punished” (Harris, 2004a, p. 34).

Throughout this chapter, I have shown how the girls’ beliefs about selfhood were influenced by an aggressive discourse of neoliberal individualism. Within this world-view, people are valued according to their ability to “market” themselves as commodities within an uncertain and volatile economy. The participants saw the self as the product of an ongoing project of self-construction. This ties in with their beliefs about self-expression; for the girls, self-expression was itself a form of self-work which enabled them to construct socially-acceptable selves. Despite their deeply individualistic views, the girls clearly saw the self as a fundamentally social entity, assessing their own self-worth in relation to other people. There was a highly competitive world-view, in which individuals were pitted against one another in a ruthless neoliberal economy. As such, they subscribed to a reflexive version of selfhood, which was self-regulating, self-conscious and self-aware. Not only did they see the self as a static entity, they also saw it as something which people *do*, hence their use of the verbal phrase “*being yourself*”, which suggests an active process. It was through this process, and through their use of neoliberal discourse, that neoliberal selfhood was performed and perpetuated by the girls.

6 The Voice

“You can just tell that it’s all from the heart ... just the way he sings it”

The participants considered singing to be enormously important, and ideas about the voice were central to their engagement with and understanding of popular music. In general, they regarded pop stars as singers, rather than performers, entertainers or celebrities, and their beliefs about singing underpinned their wider opinions about music. In this chapter, I investigate the girls’ beliefs about the voice, exploring the broader ideological discourses underlying these views.

6.1 Vocal skill

The participants were very interested in vocal ability, and they believed that all pop stars should be skilled vocalists. This belief played a key role in their musical judgements.

If they’re good singers, I like them. (Chloe)

I think it’s not always about how they look and how they are, it’s whether their voice is good, because some people are in the music industry and they’re not exactly, like, the best singers in the world. (Holly)

It’s not about your looks, it’s about like being a star, it’s like about your voice, like, you need to focus more on your voice. (Clare)

The girls had very prescriptive ideas about what it meant to be a “good” singer. In general, they agreed that it was important for vocalists to have a broad vocal range.

I like Rihanna because ... her singing is very nice. She can do like a low pitch to a high pitch. (Zara)

[Miley Cyrus’s] tones are all right. Like the tones of her voice, how she says it like. She’ll go from a low to a high ... (Vicky)

Beyoncé, she’s my inspiration because, like, she’s got a good voice ... she can go from, erm, like, a deep kind of voice to a, like, a high-pitched voice. And that helps with ... with vocals. (Summer)

I like Ariana Grande ... [she] has a really good voice. She can ... like, her vocals can go really high. (Pippa)

The girls clearly felt that it was important for performers to be able to sing in both a low and a high register, and they were particularly impressed by vocalists who could sing very high. Their language implied both motion and energy, suggesting a preference for a dynamic, agile style of singing; in particular, they were interested in singers who were able to (as Vicky and Summer

described it) “go from” a low note to a high note. Their discussions of singing focused on potentiality, and they repeatedly used the modal verb “can” to highlight this sense of possibility, discussing what performers were *potentially* able to do; Pippa, for instance, reported that Ariana Grande’s voice “can go really high”. The participants clearly saw singing as a demonstration of musical skill. For them to believe that a pop star was a skilled vocalist, they had to have heard them singing live (either on television or at a concert).

In this way, the girls’ opinions about the voice reflected their moralistic beliefs about work. Many of them described singing as a labour-intensive activity, which required a great deal of effort. Clare, for example, believed that Adele’s considerable vocal skill was the result of hard work and practice.

[Adele] keeps practising and practising and, like, she wants to warm up her, like, vocal cords up and stuff. (Clare)

Image is important, but like voice is more important ‘cause if you send an album out that is really rubbish and you have like a really rubbish voice because you haven’t warmed up your vocal cords, like no-one’ll listen to it, they’ll, like, just ignore it. But if you have a really good voice and it, like, you really worked hard on, like, trying to ... warm up your vocal cords ready for it, then I think that voice is more important than looks. (Clare)

Because they saw vocal skill as the product of hard work and practice, the girls tended to assume that skilled vocalists were hard-working, driven and committed. Because of this, they generally viewed these performers with admiration and respect, suggesting that their beliefs about singing were deeply influenced by their moral values.

The participants’ beliefs about singing also seemed to relate to their musical tastes, reflecting the conventions of their preferred musical styles. In general, they favoured styles of music which emphasised the voice, particularly the soul and R&B-influenced pop ballad style associated with performers such as Adele, Beyoncé, Sam Smith and Ariana Grande. Ariana Grande, in particular, was identified by many of the girls as an accomplished vocalist. This is probably because her singing style conformed to their expectations of what a “good” voice should sound like: she is well-known for her extremely wide vocal range and her ability to sing very high, sometimes in the so-called “whistle register”.¹¹ This vocal style is referred to colloquially as vocal gymnastics, and is very much associated with earlier pop stars or “divas”, such as Whitney Houston and Mariah Carey (both of whom have had a major influence on current singers, including the likes of Ariana Grande, Beyoncé, Adele and Sam Smith). This

¹¹ The term “whistle register” refers to the highest female vocal register. The light, breathy “whistle tones” of this register are sometimes compared with the sound of a flute or whistle.

vocal style tends to be somewhat demonstrative or “showy”, placing the voice at the forefront of the mix, in order to draw attention to the virtuosic vocal skill of the performer.

It is perhaps significant that this style of music is widely associated with television talent shows, such as *The X Factor* and *The Voice*, programmes which many of the participants watched avidly. Many of the contestants on these shows sing in a soul-influenced ballad style, which often involves vocal gymnastics. The competition-style format of television talent shows taps into the idea that the primary function of musical performance is to showcase the singer’s voice, so that the audience can assess his or her vocal skill. This is particularly true of *The Voice*, a show which presents the singer’s voice as the central focus within popular music.¹² Television talent shows arguably encourage a rational, almost empirical, approach to the appreciation and evaluation of music. To an extent, the viewer is encouraged to identify with the judges, who use their observation and judgement to evaluate the perceived quality of the contestants’ performances.

The premise of these shows reflects the girls’ beliefs about work, skill and success. Contestants are required to demonstrate their musical skill to the judges and the audience, and they are (in theory) judged on this basis. Those who are deemed to be most accomplished are rewarded with fame, fortune and the opportunity to launch a music career, while those who fail to impress are often humiliated and ridiculed. For the girls, then, television talent shows realised their deeply-felt moral values, offering a gratifying sense of moral balance. It was clear from their discussions that they saw the act of singing itself as an embodiment of highly-valued ideals of hard work and perseverance. In this way, then, the girls’ beliefs about vocal skill reflected neoliberal discourses of self-work and self-construction.

6.2 The authentic voice

The girls saw the voice primarily as a vehicle for emotional expression. During their discussions, some of the participants used the phrase “singing from the heart” to describe the act of vocal expression. Fiona was particularly preoccupied with this idea, repeatedly stressing the importance of singing from the heart.

¹² *The Voice* is a televised singing competition featuring “blind auditions”. During these auditions, the contestants perform to judges, who are facing away from the stage. To signal their approval, the judges can push a button. This rotates the judge’s chair, revealing the singer’s identity to the judge. This format taps into the idea that the voice should be judged on its sonic merits alone, and that the appearance of the singer is irrelevant to the performance.

It's always good to, like, sing [songs] from the heart because then they ... they're actually singing and they bring out the best in your voice, I guess. (Fiona)

I like Sam Smith at the moment because he brought out a song called "I'm Not the Only One", and it's like, it's really like from the heart and it's really like going out to everyone. (Fiona)

[Beyoncé] still sings from the heart ... whereas Miley Cyrus is completely different. She doesn't sing from the heart, I don't think. Although she tries to show herself off, she doesn't sing from the heart or doesn't put a lot of effort into it. (Fiona)

The expression "singing from the heart" is somewhat ambiguous, and is open to more than one possible interpretation. It is, however, likely that the girls used this phrase to allude to the act of emotional communication. In common parlance, the heart is seen as the seat of human emotion. It is also commonly understood to be the root of ambition, motivation and willpower, hence the widespread use of expressions such as "following your heart".

For the girls, the heart and the voice were inextricably linked, and both were seen to have an important emotional function. Emotions were thought to emanate directly from the heart, which was seen as the emotional core of the person. The voice was seen as the bearer of these emotions, responsible for mediating them to the wider external world. Used in this way, the phrase "singing from the heart" constructs the voice as a vehicle for the singer's innermost emotions. The girls valued this idea extremely highly and felt that, by singing from the heart, performers were offering the listener a unique insight into their private emotional lives.

During their focus group discussion, Molly and Fiona identified Sam Smith, Ariana Grande, Jess Glynne and Beyoncé as performers who sing from the heart. This suggests that they linked vocal proficiency with emotional communication, since all of these stars are known for their distinctive singing style and impressive vocal technique. They also broadly fit within the category of the traditional solo pop star or diva, a role that is typically performed by women,¹³ and are famous for performing conventional love songs focusing on themes of romance, heartbreak and inner strength. These songs tend to conform to the standards of first person authenticity: they are generally "honest" in tone, expressing sincere emotions from the point of view of the singer. It is therefore likely that these singers *intend* to "sing from the heart", adopting a straightforward mode of emotional expression in their performances.

¹³ It is perhaps notable that, with the exception of Sam Smith, all of these performers are women. In a recent interview, Sam Smith revealed that he identifies as non-binary and genderqueer, stating that he feels neither male nor female (Runtagh, 2019). He has also spoken about the influence of female pop stars, such as Whitney Houston and Chaka Khan, on his music: "as a kid, that's who I wanted to be ... I just wanted to bring The Diva" ("Sam Smith reveals his biggest influences," 2014, para. 6).

The idea of singing from the heart was associated with some genres more than others. Soul music, in particular, was identified by the girls as an authentic style, and consequently they tended to favour performers who sang in a soul-influenced vocal style.

[Sam Smith is] a soul singer so, like, he'll put a lot into making the song. A lot from his voice as well ... you can just tell that it's all from the heart, and just the way he sings it. (Fiona)

I like some female singers as well ... I used to like Adele and things like that, so ... I like soul. Like it comes from the heart. (Erin)

Although they are generally described as pop singers, Sam Smith and Adele sing in a vocal style which is strongly influenced by soul music, as well as other genres, including jazz, blues and R&B. In an interview in 2011, Adele explained that her style was influenced by famous R&B singers, such as Mary J. Blige and Alicia Keys (Touré, 2011, para. 10), and in 2014 Sam Smith identified the late jazz singer Amy Winehouse as a key influence on his work ("Sam Smith reveals his biggest influences," 2014, para. 4).

In order to understand why soul music was seen by the girls as authentic, it is necessary to address the complex and highly sensitive issue of race. In particular, it is important to consider how problematic, and sometimes overtly racist, discourses influence how music is heard and interpreted by audiences. It is notable that styles such as soul, jazz, blues and R&B are widely associated with black culture, and are often referred to as "black music" (Floyd, 1995). Some scholars have argued that the term black music is problematic, and that it represents an essentialist view of race, overlooking the hybridity and diversity of contemporary popular music (Hatch & Millward, 1987; Tagg, 1989). In his critique of the term "black music", Tagg (1989) notes that the term is generally not used to refer to *all* styles of music performed by black musicians, or aimed at black listeners; instead it is usually used to refer to *American* black culture. Nevertheless, Tagg concedes that the concept of black music remains useful in some contexts, since it continues to hold considerable sway within the popular imagination; audiences typically subscribe to a "common sense" definition of black music, associating certain genres, such as soul, R&B and blues, with blackness.

Traditionally, the term black music was used to refer specifically to the music of rural, economically-deprived communities. Consequently, black music became associated with black American history and the legacy of slavery, segregation and the civil rights movement (Moore, 2002). Blues music, in particular, has historically been linked with the impoverished, racist American South (Mack, 2015), and blues songs often tell of the struggles and injustices faced by black people living in this particular region. As such, blues is widely assumed to be an

authentic style, since it is thought to embody the pain and suffering of oppressed people (Moore, 2002). The word “blues” itself refers to the expression of emotions, particularly sadness and despair – emotions which are sometimes referred to as “the blues” (E. Wald, 2010).

These historic associations contribute to the aura of authenticity surrounding black music. Even today, black music continues to be closely associated with ideas of emotional honesty and rawness. Indeed, scholars such as Tagg (1989) and Grazian (2003) argue that, to an extent, black music is defined in terms of its perceived adherence to a stereotypical notion of authenticity. Tagg argues that black music is constructed, largely by white actors, as a site for the production of authenticity, while Grazian notes that authenticity is constructed through the performance of a racialised “black” identity, which is actively promoted as a valuable commodity within the musical marketplace (p. 36).

In recent years, the idea of soul music as a specifically “black” style has become increasingly fraught, particularly since the success of popular white soul singers such as Adele and Sam Smith. This has generated much debate within the popular press about the nature of “black music”, leading to accusations of cultural appropriation and, in some cases, racism (Arceneaux, 2015; Jusino, 2016; LaSha, 2017; Legendre, 2015; Lothian-McLean, 2016; McQuaid, 2015; Weiss, 2012; S. Williams, 2015). Edgar (2014) argues that Adele’s vocal style constitutes a performance of “blackvoice”, which juxtaposes an “exaggeratedly white exterior” with a “black sound” in order to destabilise and deconstruct colonial notions of black authenticity (p. 178). Although young pop fans may not be consciously aware of these connotations, it is likely that their beliefs about soul music will, to an extent, have been shaped by racialised discourses of authenticity, since these discourses remain so dominant within the popular imagination (Edgar, 2014; Grazian, 2003, 2004b; Mack, 2015).

The vocal style employed in soul music also contributes to the genre’s perceived authenticity. Popular soul singers tend to employ a somewhat harsh timbre which is characterised by “rasping” throat sounds and vocal cracks (Dickinson, 2001, pp. 335–336; Moore, 2002, p. 212). These vocal imperfections are generally assumed to represent the expression of deeply-felt emotions. Barthes (1977/1990) referred to these vocal imperfections as “the grain of the voice”, describing how the physical body is manifested through the sound of the human voice: the breathy sound of air escaping the singer’s throat, the clicking of the tongue, lips and teeth, and the creaky, sinewy sound of worn-out vocal muscles. Moore (2002) argues that these sounds convey an impression of authenticity because they conjure up behaviours associated with emotional suffering; for example, when a listener hears the sound of a rough or harsh singing voice, he or she is encouraged to imagine the events which gave rise to this sound, such as

excessive crying or shouting (p. 12). Consequently, vocal imperfections are highly-prized within many musical genres, since they are assumed to represent the expression of deeply-felt emotions. This preference for raw (or “grainy”) soul-influenced vocal styles indicates a fetishization of the “natural” singing voice, and a belief in the essential corporeality of the voice.

6.3 Technology and the “natural” voice

This notion of a corporeal “natural” voice was also reflected in the participants’ attitudes towards vocal enhancement technologies, such as auto-tune.¹⁴ The girls strongly opposed the use of auto-tune in pop music on the basis that it corrupted the supposed “naturalness” of the singer’s voice.

I like, erm, Adele because ... well, I don’t feel like she uses auto-tune as much as some of the other artists ‘cause I feel like her voice is quite real. (Amelia)

It is worth noting that the participants’ discussions of auto-tune did not accurately represent how the technology is used in popular music, and this suggests that they had a limited understanding of auto-tune and its applications. Interestingly, they did not differentiate between cosmetic uses of auto-tune (which correct pitch imperfections) and aesthetic uses (which enhance the voice for artistic effect). Recently, auto-tune has been used more widely as an aesthetic tool – most notably, by artists such as Cher, T-Pain and Kanye West. Despite this, it is still widely seen as a corrective tool which is used to iron out pitch inaccuracies, and it is popularly understood as a way to disguise “wrong notes” and “bad singing”. The girls seemed unaware of the prevalence of auto-tune in popular music, and their discussions implied a belief that auto-tune is always clearly audible and recognisable (on the contrary, auto-tune is widely used by many different performers, and is usually imperceptible). It is therefore likely that the girls may sometimes have been mistakenly referring to aesthetic uses of auto-tune (which are often very obvious), rather than corrective uses (which are usually much more difficult to detect).

Several of the girls expressed the view that auto-tune is misleading. Jade, Phoebe, Helen and Sophie discussed this in their focus group, arguing that concert-goers had a right to hear a performer’s “real” voice before paying for a concert ticket.

¹⁴ Auto-tune is a pitch correction technology that is widely used to amend vocal pitch imperfections. Auto-tune manipulates the frequency of specific notes, correcting the pitch while maintaining the original vocal quality.

Jade: ... but like people like Sam Smith ... like, he *is* a good singer ...

Phoebe: Oh yeah, I know.

Jade: ... and he's good on CDs *and* he's good on live.

Phoebe: I love Sam Smith.

Jade: He's so good that they don't have to change his voice on a CD, they just keep it the same.

Bridget: Do you think their ... do you think their voices have been changed on the CDs?

Phoebe: Yeah.

Helen: Yeah.

Jade: Yes, they have.

Phoebe: Yeah, because with the recording, like, they can, like, like, fiddle with it.

Bridget: Do you think that's wrong, to fiddle with it?

Jade: Yes.

Helen: Yes.

Sophie: Yes.

Phoebe: *Yeah* ... because then people don't actually hear their real voices.

Sophie: And then they like buy tickets to go and see them and, like, they're so rubbish.

Phoebe: Yeah ...

Jade: Yeah. People like, I think that like ... it disappoints their fans, 'cause they're just like "oh my god, I love them and listen to their CDs every day" and then ... they get to the concert and they're like ...

Some of the girls felt that auto-tune gave performers an unfair advantage in the musical marketplace. Yasmin and Leanne, for example, felt that the use of auto-tune on television talent shows was unfair because it might influence the outcome of these competitions.

Yeah, because like if you're auditioning against someone, you have to use your ... your proper voice to win, 'cause you can't go and play auto-tune when you're live. (Yasmin)

I don't think [auto-tune is] fair because it's not their voice. Like, d'you know one year they did *X Factor* but they put something, like, in the microphone or they changed the voices, so they went through even though they were bad singers, and that's not fair! (Leanne)

It's like, it's not their actual voice, so they might make 'em look better so people who are watching it ... they vote for them and ... they shouldn't go through, then there's other people that should go through and ... they want to go far in life and they've auditioned for *X Factor* ... but they've, they've lost because they're making other people sound better. It's, like, not fair. (Leanne)

It is generally assumed that contestants on *The X Factor* should sing live, without the help of auto-tune or post-production sound engineering. However, in 2010 the programme's producers were forced to admit that auto-tune had been used to manipulate the voices of several contestants. Leanne was aware of this scandal, and she used it to support her argument that using auto-tune was unfair. This ties in with the girls' view of singing as a competitive activity which demonstrates a performer's skill and technique.

Amelia took this idea further, describing performers who used auto-tune as dishonest and immoral. Specifically, she felt that using auto-tune was unfair because it left other performers (who did not use it) at a disadvantage.

These artists, they make like so much money ... from singing, but then, like, most of it's auto-tuned, so it's not really fair for, like, like more local artists who, like, give more of their actual voice but then they're not making as much money. (Amelia)

I don't think people should be earning so much money when they've technically got like a robotic voice ... because then there's other artists that aren't as popular but they actually probably they might not be able to afford auto-tune, or they're choosing not to, but they're not selling as many hits, so ... I don't know why, I just have a thing with it. I just don't like listening to auto-tune sometimes. (Amelia)

In these quotations, Amelia describes how her interpretation of music is influenced by her moral values: "I just have a thing with [auto-tune]. I just don't like listening to auto-tune sometimes." This illustrates the blurring of boundaries between music's extra-musical, contextual meanings (which are, very often, closely bound up with moral values) and music's inherent, sonic meanings (in other words, "the music itself"). Amelia suggested that her perception of the *sound* of auto-tune was, in part, shaped by her negative attitudes towards the technology, which in turn were influenced by broader moral discourses relating to ideas of truthfulness and authenticity. In other words, she disliked the sound of auto-tune *because* she had a moral objection to it. Her discussion of auto-tune demonstrates how people's beliefs and attitudes influence their engagement with music (Green, 1988, 1997; McClary, 1991, 2000). As Kramer (2002) argues, "musical meaning consists of a specific, mutual interplay between musical experience and its contexts" (p. 8).

Amelia's attitudes towards auto-tune also chimed with the wider belief that people should be fairly rewarded for their skill and hard work. Because of this intensely moralistic world-view,

the participants disapproved of technologies which were seen to enhance, improve or conceal the “real” voice, and this made them deeply suspicious of auto-tune. The existence of auto-tune disrupted their idealised view of the music industry as a meritocratic domain in which artists were justly rewarded for their efforts and accomplishments.

The idea that auto-tune “corrupts” the supposedly “natural” voice invokes Moore’s (2002) notion of first person authenticity. First person authenticity relies on the idea of “unmediated expression” (Moore, 2002, p. 212), a form of communication which is interpreted as emotionally honest or authentic because of its perceived directness or “purity”. In general, an utterance is seen as unmediated when “the distance between its (mental) origin and its (physical) manifestation is wilfully compressed to nil by those with a motive for so perceiving it” (Moore, 2002, p. 213).

The idea of unmediated expression is particularly relevant to the voice, since the voice is widely understood as the “purest” form of expression. When a person sings, the sound (the voice) seems to emanate directly from the sound source (the singer’s body). It is this perceived closeness which creates an impression of unmediated expression and, because of this, the “natural” voice is widely understood as a vehicle for emotional authenticity (Mayhew, 1999, p. 73). The girls therefore viewed auto-tune as an obstacle which disrupted the purity of the mediation process by coming between the sound source (the singer’s body) and the product (the voice, as it is heard by the listener). Moreover, they took the idea of unmediated expression extremely literally because they saw the voice as an embodiment (or representation) of the inner self, a widely-held belief which continues to influence attitudes towards singing and other forms of vocal performance (Jarman-Ivens, 2011, p. 2; Koestenbaum, 1991, p. 205).

Their beliefs about auto-tune also suggest a general anxiety about the role of technology in popular music. Frith (1986) notes that popular audiences have long been suspicious of the use of technology in music. Linking this with ideas of “naturalness”, Frith suggests that opposition to technology in popular music derives from a widespread belief that “technology is opposed to nature” (p. 264). Auto-tune is a particularly controversial technology, since it interferes with the pitch, and sometimes also the tone, of the human voice (Dickinson, 2001). Other characteristics, such as volume, are generally considered to be less significant than pitch and tone, particularly since the normalisation of amplification technologies; however, as Frith points out, the microphone was initially viewed with suspicion when it was first used by musicians such as Bing Crosby and Rudy Vallée in the 1920s and 1930s. Given this historical context, it is worth considering how the girls’ beliefs about auto-tune fit within a wider anti-technological discourse.

Some of the girls likened auto-tune to a disguise which hid the singer's true voice.

I think it's a bit like someone saying "oh, I'm really pretty," but they've actually had Botox. (Amelia)

It's like putting a mask on somebody ... when they actually look ugly. (Leanne)

Through these comparisons, the girls linked the voice with the physical body, constructing singing as an inherently bodily act. They viewed the voice as an extension of the body, an idea which recalls the phrase "singing from the heart". By referencing the heart, this allusion highlights the bodily source of the voice. Moreover, it grounds the act of singing firmly within the corporeal realm, conjuring up the bodily mechanisms which produce the voice (including the lungs, the throat and the vocal cords). Unlike instrumental sound, vocal sound is the product of processes which take place *inside* the body, and this evokes an air of mystique (Jarman-Ivens, 2011, p. 27). This idealised notion of corporeality underpinned the girls' beliefs about vocal authenticity, which constructed the "natural" voice as both enigmatic and sublime.

Although not completely absorbed in display, the singer is, however, close to complete absorption, because of the intricate connection, indeed the unity, of the displaying body itself with the instrumental source of the singing. The voice is the one musical instrument whose sound-production mechanisms have no intrinsic links with anything outside the body. Rather, the voice springs from the body, entirely and ... without any extraneous aid. The body is the instrument. (Green, 1997, p. 28)

The girls' preference for the supposed unaltered human voice indicates a deeply literal understanding of corporeal authenticity which imagines the natural human body as essentially authentic. Indeed, the very notion of the "unaltered" or "natural" body is itself problematic, since the girls' beliefs about naturalness were themselves dependent on a specific set of cultural ideas and practices. This corporeal authenticity goes beyond Moore's (2002) notion of first person authenticity, instead echoing Fornäs's (1995) concept of "subjective authenticity" (p. 276): "the striving for individual bodily presence in subjective authenticity can take the form of an anti-intellectual biologism that avoids all reflexivity in a mythologizing return to pure nature" (p. 277).

Notably, their discussions of auto-tune were highly gendered, focusing primarily on female stars. This may well reflect auto-tune's association with "feminine" or "low" musical styles, such as mainstream pop, dance pop and Europop (Dickinson, 2001). Indeed, male performers who experiment with auto-tune tend to be afforded more artistic credibility than female performers, who are often criticised for not using their "real" voices; Kanye West, for example, was celebrated as a creative innovator for using auto-tune in his 2008 album *808s and*

Heartbreak. The girls rarely discussed men's use of vocal correction or enhancement technologies, and it seemed that they were more concerned about how these technologies might be used to distort women's voices. This arguably implies a belief that there is something uniquely special and valuable about the unaltered *female* voice.

By invoking a discourse of corporeal vocal authenticity, the girls unknowingly perpetuated patriarchal attitudes towards women. Specifically, this discourse reinforces the idea that womanhood belongs to the physical, bodily realm, which is divorced from the masculine domain of technology (Bradby, 1993, pp. 156–157; McClary, 1991, p. 138). This invokes the dualistic separation of body and mind (or soul), a gendered dichotomy which links femininity with the body and masculinity with the mind (Bordo, 2003; Gatens, 1996; Grosz, 1994). As such, women are seen primarily as bodies, and they tend to be valued according to their perceived beauty. Within the media, women are frequently portrayed as sensual, earthy and pre-technological, in direct contrast with men, who are typically presented as cerebral, scientific and technologically-able (Bradby, 1993; Dickinson, 2001; Green, 1997). The girls' beliefs about auto-tune were therefore gendered; arguably, they viewed auto-tune as a masculine symbol which problematised the authentic bodily naturalness of the female singer, challenging the notion of singing as an inherently feminine act (Green, 1997, pp. 21–51; Mayhew, 1999, pp. 72–74). By invoking the idea of the authentic female voice, the participants asserted a highly gendered, feminised version of authenticity.

7 Gender, Image and the Body

“If you look nice, people will start to like you”

Popular music is a fundamentally visual medium (Korsgaard, 2017; Vernallis, 2004, 2013). As well as selling music, artists must also sell an “image” of themselves (Dyer, 2004; Meyers, 2009), mediated via a range of different media, including music videos, promotional material, press coverage and social media content. A great deal of thought and effort goes into the production of images within the music industry. Images of the body, in particular, are central to the culture of popular music, and the body (particularly the female body) is often presented as a spectacle for the audience’s consumption (Railton & Watson, 2011).

Unsurprisingly, my participants were deeply interested in the image and physical appearance of pop stars, and they discussed this a great deal during the research. These discussions were highly gendered, focusing mainly on the appearance of female pop stars. This chapter sheds light on these discussions, considering the gendered discourses that shaped the participants’ beliefs about female beauty. This is followed by a broader discussion of the girls’ attitudes towards gender norms and their beliefs about how men and women (and boys and girls) should behave in the “real world”.

7.1 The importance of beauty

There seemed to be an expectation amongst the girls that female pop stars should be “beautiful” or “pretty”, and they expressed admiration for stars who they regarded as beautiful. Conversely, some of the girls criticised stars who, they felt, did not live up to accepted female beauty standards.

I mean, I don’t think [Katy Perry’s] particularly pretty, without all her makeup on ... Beyoncé’s prettier, isn’t she ... I mean, her hair is so pretty! (Erin)

I like Bipasha Basu more. She’s really nice and she’s beautiful as well. (Nadia)

I like Rihanna because ... her singing is very nice ... and, er, she’s like pretty. (Zara)

... there’s like Paramore and stuff, and there’s Hayley Williams, and I think she’s really good-looking. Like, she’s got like ... she’s really beautiful and stuff. (Lauren)

Pippa discussed this in her interview, explaining that one of the main reasons she liked Ariana Grande was her perceived beauty. It is clear from the following extract that Pippa's beliefs were strongly influenced by the expectation that female performers (and women in general) should be beautiful.

Pippa: I like Ariana Grande. She's quite pretty, I like her.

Bridget: Yeah. Yeah, why do you like her then?

Pippa: She's like really pretty and has a really good voice. She can ... like, her vocals can go really high.

Bridget: ... Do you think the image with her is quite important?

Pippa: Erm ... I think she does take, er, care of herself, like, to do all her hair and everything, and to look nice.

Bridget: Yeah. So it's quite good that she ... you think it's quite good that she looks really pretty and stuff?

Pippa: Yeah, because like ... if you look nice, people will start to like you ...

This extract demonstrates that the girls identified with female pop stars, and that they looked to popular music for information about how women should behave and present themselves. Not only did Pippa praise Ariana Grande for her good looks, she also used this topic as a vehicle to discuss the subject of feminine appearance more generally, stressing the importance of beauty: "if you look nice, people will start to like you".

In order to be considered beautiful, the participants felt that female stars should present themselves in a stereotypically "feminine" manner. This idea was reinforced by their use of language; they tended to use feminised terms, such as "beautiful" and "pretty", to describe physical attractiveness in women, whereas they used sexually-objectifying terms, such as "fit" and "hot", to describe attractive male performers. As Galambos, Berenbaum and McHale (2009) note, adolescent girls' beliefs about the body are highly gendered, reflecting strict beauty standards which represent a patriarchal feminine ideal (p. 320).

The girls saw hair as a powerful symbol of femininity. Ideally, they felt that women should wear their hair long, and they saw long hair as a prerequisite of female beauty. Many of the participants were extremely critical of Miley Cyrus, who had recently cut her hair very short. Chloe and Susie, for example, argued that this haircut made her unattractive.

Chloe: I used to like her when she was Hannah Montana, I thought she was pretty! Now she's gone and cut her hair off!

Susie: (Laughs) Now she's ugly!

Summer and Pippa expressed similar views, linking Miley Cyrus's short haircut with gendered ideas about how women and girls should behave.

Summer: She cut her hair off like a boy, she started acting like a boy.

Pippa: She used to have good songs. Like, when she had long black, brown hair.

In this extract, Summer links short hair with masculinity and maleness ("she cut her hair off like a boy"). This demonstrates a rigid understanding of gender norms and a belief that women should always look traditionally feminine. Throughout history, women's hair has been seen as deeply culturally meaningful; traditionally, hair has been seen as a symbol of femininity and erotic power, and long hair is therefore seen as a stereotypically "feminine" style (Weitz, 2004). The girls clearly felt that it was very important for women and girls to perform femininity in specific socially-sanctioned ways, and women who did not adhere to these standards were seen as unfeminine, and therefore unattractive. Their disapproval of women with short hair also suggests a degree of discomfort about the disruption of patriarchal gender norms and an uneasiness about individuals who transgress these norms. To an extent, their preference for long hair may also reflect recent fashions for girls. In the UK, it is currently very unusual for girls (particularly girls in early adolescence) to cut their hair short; indeed, the vast majority of the girls who took part in the study had long (or very long) hair. As such, their beliefs about hair probably reflected their perception of "normal" beauty standards, according to their specific cultural context.

The participants' beliefs about feminine beauty were also inextricably linked with ideas of "naturalness". In order to appear beautiful, the girls felt that women needed to look as "natural" as possible.

[Adele's] just, like, a bit natural. A bit more natural. (Summer)

You just need to be yourself ... just be yourself and just look natural. (Nicole)

The word "natural" was used by the girls to describe female stars who, they felt, did not try to modify their appearance. In contrast, they were extremely critical of women who used various means (such as beauty treatments and personal adornment) to enhance their bodies, describing these women as "fake". For example, they disapproved of women who, they felt, wore too much makeup.

[Miley Cyrus is] fake. Like, she puts so much makeup on. (Yasmin)

[Nicki Minaj] just wears wigs and stuff and loads of makeup. (Clare)

I think that [Ariana Grande] puts too much makeup on and it does kind of change her face ... if I was her, I wouldn't put as much makeup on, I would just look natural. (Selma)

The quotation above (from Selma) demonstrates the degree to which the participants identified with female pop stars. In this quotation, Selma puts herself in Ariana Grande's place: "if I was her, I wouldn't put as much makeup on". Her language emphasises agency; she portrays both herself and Ariana Grande as individuals, each capable of controlling her own image. By drawing attention to Ariana Grande's supposedly "unnatural" appearance, Selma asserted her own authenticity by comparison. By doing this, she was able to claim a more powerful identity, which allowed her to say to the world "I am authentic".

The girls were even more critical of female pop stars who had had cosmetic surgery, and they expressed disapproval, and sometimes even disgust, about these women.

[Nicki Minaj] has like surgeries all the time. (Leanne)

Like, with Dolly Parton, she was ... she got all ... like plastic surgery and things to make her look more prettier but I think she looked pretty when she just first started ... she tried to boost up her image. (Jo)

[Jessie J] doesn't go over the top, she's natural ... she doesn't, like ... do surgery or she doesn't put ... so much fake stuff on. (Selma)

[Nicki Minaj is] fake ... she's got an implant in her, erm, bum and everything ... she's fake. I don't like her either ... there's fake people and then there's real fake people, like. (Jodie)

(Laughs) ... [Nicki Minaj's] face. Her, she's got her bones like ... proper ... her skin's gone ... they've folded over her skin and stitched it to make her bones show ... and then she's had plastic surgery on her bum and boobs. (Summer)

In particular, they were interested in the perceived "naturalness" of female performers' hair, demonstrating again the immense cultural significance of hair for the girls. They felt that women should wear their hair in as natural a state as possible and, because of this, they disliked stars who had altered their hair, for example, by dyeing it, or by wearing a wig or hair extensions.

Sometimes [Ariana Grande's] fake. 'Cause she's like always wearing fake ... you know like fake ... erm, hair. And she just needs to be herself and just have natural hair, and just like natural stuff. (Nicole)

I prefer [Iggy Azalea] more than Nicki Minaj 'cause ... she doesn't wear wigs, it's just her natural hair. (Selma)

[Nicki Minaj] puts too much, like ... she ... dyes her hair and she puts wigs on ... she's fake. (Selma)

[Nicki Minaj] wears a wig. And it's no need for it. She, she should be proud for who she is and what ... what kind of things she has. (Zara)

I liked it when [Miley Cyrus] was just natural. You know, with her brown hair. (Leanne)

During their focus group, Chloe, Susie, Jo, Paige and Camilla discussed Lady Gaga's hair, questioning whether or not it was "real".

Chloe: Does she have hair? 'Cause she's always wearing different coloured wigs in different styles.

Susie: (Laughs) I know!

Jo: No, that is her hair.

Paige: Wha-?!

Chloe: That is her ...?

Jo: The majority of the time.

Camilla: No, not all of them are.

Jo: No, no. The majority of the time it is her hair.

Camilla: Yeah.

Jo: Like the short ones it's not but the majority ...

Camilla: The long ones.

Jo: Like, when you see, like, with "Alejandro" and things when she had short hair, that was a wig, but the rest of it is her real hair.

The following extract features a strikingly similar discussion (from a different focus group). In it, Jade, Sophie and Phoebe debate Jessie J's hair, questioning whether it is "real". During this exchange, the girls allude to Jessie J's decision to shave her head to raise money for Comic Relief in 2013 (in the subsequent weeks and months, she wore a variety of dramatic short hairstyles).

Jade: Yeah, so if, if it was only last year then her hair would probably be down to here, but it's actually down to here (gestures to indicate long hair) ... so it's like ...

Sophie: It could just be extensions.

Jade: It's not.

Sophie: How d'you know?

Jade: 'Cause, 'cause she, if you look up on the website "Jessie J" it tells you everything about her and she doesn't have extra extensions anymore, she's got hair to here (gestures again to indicate long hair).

Phoebe: She used to put extensions in ...

Jade: She used to put in extensions to get it down to here (gestures to indicate even longer hair).

Phoebe: ... when she only had hair, like, really, really short. Like, like when you have it cut really, really short. Like Mrs White's hair.

Sophie: Yeah.

Jade: Yeah.

Phoebe: When she had it that short, it was only like that short (gestures to indicate very short hair). And then she had extensions in. But now she doesn't have extensions because her hair's grown.

Sophie: Didn't she used to put a wig on, like when it hadn't grown at all?

Phoebe: Yeah, when it ...

Jade: Yeah, but though I like Jessie J ...

Sophie: It was in the first, in the ... video after though, she didn't put a wig on or anything, she just left it.

Phoebe: I know.

Jade: Yeah but I think that's nice. Like on the, you know, *The Voice*, like, she did it for Comic Relief, and the next *Voice* she didn't wear a wig.

Both of these extracts show that, for the girls, having "natural" hair was extremely important. In both discussions, one participant (Jo and Jade respectively) sought to defend a particular pop star (Lady Gaga and Jessie J respectively) from the accusation that her hair was "fake", offering evidence that it was, in fact, "real". It was clear from these discussions that natural hair was a valuable signifier of feminine beauty. The girls' beliefs about hair influenced their wider judgements about these stars; in order for a female performer to be judged favourably by the girls, they felt that she should have "natural" (as well as long) hair.

In this way, the girls' beliefs about feminine beauty mirrored their attitudes towards the female singing voice, since both of these ideals were based on a hierarchical distinction between the "real" and the "fake". In general, they condemned all forms of bodily enhancement and modification, from makeup to plastic surgery, linking them with dishonesty and deception. Just as they felt auto-tune corrupted the star's "natural" voice, they felt that beauty products and

procedures corrupted the star's "natural" body. As such, bodily enhancement was conceived as an obstacle which disrupted the mediation of the star's image from the source (the star's body) to the product (the image of the star). Because of this, they did not recognise the aesthetic, cosmetic or artistic possibilities of any form of bodily (or vocal) enhancement. Much like auto-tune, they viewed cosmetic surgery, beauty procedures, makeup and wigs solely in terms of their ability to mask the "natural" female body.

It is worth noting that, despite their obvious interest in the image of female performers, most of the girls denied being concerned about physical beauty. In fact, many of them argued that listeners should not pay attention to image.

I don't personally ... think it's that important because you're not going to be listening to the image, you're listening to the music. (Amelia)

I like their music, [it's] not about what they look like really. (Lily)

People say "don't judge a book by its cover", and that's what they're kind of doing. (Sophie)

During their focus group, Erin, Imogen and Daisy discussed this, suggesting that listeners should focus on a performer's voice, rather than on her physical appearance (I use the pronoun "her" deliberately, since, in this context, they referred primarily to female performers).

Erin: And I don't think it matters whether they're thick or thin or fat or whatever because ...

Imogen: Or black or white, it doesn't really matter what you are.

Erin: ... yeah, black or white, because it's, you're, you're following them for their voice.

Daisy: You are, yeah.

Erin: ... and that's, you shouldn't follow them because ...

Imogen: They look nice.

Erin: ... because they look really, like, thin and "I wanna be exactly like her" ...

For many of the girls, the song "All About the Bass" (2014) by Meghan Trainor embodied their belief that physical appearance is (or should be) unimportant. They mentioned this song frequently during the research, describing it as positive and empowering. Many of the girls argued that "All About the Bass" promoted a healthy attitude towards body image, since the lyrics celebrate women with larger, curvier body types.

Yeah, because [Meghan Trainor] had a bit of a ... she got a bit bullied sometimes because of her image ... like, and she was saying it doesn't really matter what you look like, just like be yourself. (Sophie)

That's why Meghan Trainor's good because she's not really about that 'cause her song's about that it doesn't matter what you look like. (Amelia)

I think that, like, it's a good message 'cause it's getting over to people that it's not like just your size that's important. (Phoebe)

... it is quite nice that, 'cause people feel better when they listen to the song ... (Jade)

This belief (in the unimportance of image) ties in with the girls' wider views. Firstly, it reflects their belief (discussed in Chapter 4) that listeners should pay attention to music's inherent meanings ("the music itself"), rather than its extra-musical properties (which they referred to as "image"). Secondly, it links with the girls' understanding of the self, particularly their belief in the existence of an essential inner self or soul (discussed in Chapter 5). Through their discussions, they embraced a dualistic approach to the self, viewing the body and the soul as separate entities. As such, they constructed the body as a vessel for the soul, and this may have led them to view the body as unimportant, since they saw it as *separate* from the "real" person. Thirdly, their rejection of "image" might also reflect their tolerant approach to diversity and difference. This approach was exemplified by their use of slogans such as "don't judge a book by its cover", which promote kindness and compassion, suggesting that people should be valued for more than their physical appearance. It is possible that they may have picked up these ideals from adults; as Currie et al. (2009) note, adults often attempt to boost girls' confidence by imparting positive slogans such as "it's what's inside that counts", in an attempt to counter negative media messages about women's bodies (p. 205).

It is therefore important to maintain a critical perspective on the girls' statements about the perceived insignificance of female beauty. In order to understand these utterances, they should be viewed within the context of a culture in which the sexualisation of women and girls is both normalised and ingrained. As demonstrated throughout this chapter, the participants were clearly very concerned about the appearance of female stars, and they were well aware that feminine beauty was a powerful source of social value (as Pippa noted, "if you look nice, people will start to like you"). As such, the girls' pronouncements about the supposed unimportance of beauty can be understood as a response to the hostile, image-obsessed culture surrounding them. In a sense, then, these utterances demonstrate a heightened awareness of female objectification, rather than an ignorance of it.

In many ways, the participants' focus on the female body reflects the tendency, within a patriarchal society, for women to be valued primarily for their physical bodies (Warwick, 2007, p. 73). Equally, it reflects sexist attitudes towards female musicians, particularly singers. Within popular culture, female performers are often objectified, and their musical output tends to be evaluated according to extra-musical factors, such as their perceived attractiveness, femininity or physical beauty (Green, 1997, p. 16; McClary, 1991, p. 138). Again, these beliefs indicate a corporeal view of femininity, which constructs womanhood as an inherently physical, bodily state, in comparison with masculinity, which is associated with the immaterial mind. Within this dichotomy, womanhood is constructed as the sexualised Other, in relation to the male subject.

7.2 Living with the male gaze

The girls were acutely aware of the exceptionally high beauty standards imposed on women in the public eye, noting that female celebrities were expected to be exceptionally thin and conventionally attractive. Lauren, Jenny, Nora and Lily discussed this in their focus group, arguing that female performers were held to higher standards than male performers. To illustrate this, they pointed out that male rock stars were generally not required to maintain the same level of physical perfection, and they identified this as a gendered double standard.

Jenny: Adele's not especially ugly, I think ...

Nora: Well, I dunno because ...

Lily: No. I don't think she's ugly. I think she's a ... she's not like ...

Lauren: She's an average-looking kind of person.

Jenny: Yeah.

Lily: She's not like ... slim, like ...

Jenny: Yeah.

(All the girls burst out laughing)

Nora: (Mimicking Lily) "She's not like slim"! No, 'cause I think it's kind of essential for like girl, like, singers to be like good-looking.

Jenny: Yeah. Yeah, they have, like, higher standards for girls.

Nora: Yeah.

Jenny: Like singers and actresses and people like that.

Lauren: (Referring to the pictures of musicians and performers brought in by the girls, most of which were of male rock stars and bands) ... I think ... I think, erm, it's bad though because like ... girls ... like boys and singers and stuff, like, not many of these people are particularly good-looking, like, at all.

Lily: No ... (pointing at one of the pictures) ... especially him.

Nora: (Pointing at a picture of 5 Seconds of Summer) ... except them.

Lauren: Except them.

Nora: Like, you can't help if you're ugly.

Bridget: Do you, why do you ... so do you think that is? That boys can look ...?

Lauren: Well, because boys like ... because they just go in, like, rock groups and stuff and then if you're in a rock group ... like, [the fans] don't care if they're like good-looking enough.

Jenny: Yeah, they don't care.

Lauren: Because, like, people who listen to rock music and stuff ... and, like, well, that sort of stuff, they're sorta like, "yay! It doesn't matter if you're good-looking or not." But then that sorta like doesn't work when it goes to like Paramore 'cause Hayley Williams is really good-looking.

Jenny: Yeah, and a woman. Yeah.

Many of the girls felt that the media's portrayal of women was harmful, and they argued that it promoted negative attitudes towards female beauty, weight and body shape. Jenny felt that Nicki Minaj's song "Anaconda" objectified women, promoting an unhealthy physical ideal. Because of this, she felt that the song (and its music video) might make girls feel more self-conscious about their bodies.

[“Anaconda” is] so stupid ... I mean, people are like “oh, [Nicki Minaj is] such a ... role model and such an inspiration.” It's like, really? She's singing about butts. You know ... it's kinda like objectifying [women]. I don't know if that's the right word (laughs). But like ... I don't know, people might think about their bums more (laughs). (Jenny)

Some of the girls admitted that they were influenced by media images of idealised female beauty. Molly and Fiona, for example, linked these images with their own body image concerns. Like Jenny, they identified Nicki Minaj's song "Anaconda" as particularly damaging because they felt it promoted an unhealthy, unrealistic body image (described by Molly as "big bum, thin body"). Comparing "Anaconda" with "All About the Bass", they argued that "All About the Bass" encouraged a healthier attitude to weight and body size.

- Molly: I definitely think there's pressure on, erm, for girls about their appearance.
- Fiona: Yeah.
- Molly: When actually there's nothing there that's wrong. Like the song "All About the Bass" ...
- Fiona: Yeah, that's ...
- Molly: I think that's a really good song for appearances. 'Cause like Nicki Minaj is saying, like, you've got to have a big bum, thin body, when actually you don't.
- Fiona: It says, erm ... one of the lyrics is "it's pretty clear I ain't no size two." But it's like, erm ... it says it's all about there's things about size ... and like, you shouldn't be like upset or worried or, like, down about your size because there's no right size, there's no wrong size.
- Molly: Exactly.
- Fiona: So when everybody says in the magazines "oh, she's perfect, she's got a perfect body," it's ... no-one's perfect and it's not a perfect thing.
- Bridget: Mm. Yeah.
- Molly: Yeah. Yeah, I think size is a big thing, erm, for girls ...
- Bridget: Yeah.
- Fiona: Yeah.
- Molly: ... which I, I ... I do worry about.
- Fiona: I do.

Some of the girls argued that objectified images of women in pop music might also have a negative impact on boys and young men. Jo, for example, argued that boys might be influenced by such images, and that this might alter their beliefs about how women and girls should look.

I think [pop stars] should just all just stay the same and stay natural and then they're not putting images into boys' heads and girls' heads of how they should be. Like you have to be skinny to be pretty and things, but you don't really. (Jo)

The participants had reason to be concerned about this, since many of them already felt under pressure to conform to rigid beauty standards in their everyday lives. Molly and Fiona, for example, described how these standards were strictly enforced by their peers, noting that their male classmates would often bully girls about their weight and appearance.

Just that ... boys treat girls a bit disrespectfully, I guess ... well, they're like, I guess they're only trying to have a joke with their mates and things, but like some

things that they might say are a bit too far. Yeah, like they might call us, I don't know ... all girls are fat and all girls are ugly and things like that ... only like mean it as a joke, but we still might take it a bit offensively, and they need to still respect that. (Fiona)

The girls' discussions indicate an awareness of the male gaze (Mulvey, 2004), and of objectification: "the experience of being treated *as a body* (or collection of body parts) valued predominantly for its use to (or consumption by) others" (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, p. 174). They described a world in which female bodies were constantly surveyed, assessed and evaluated, and they were acutely aware that women in the media (as well as in the "real world") were watched by men and boys. Consequently, they felt alienated by the objectified images of women that they saw in the media, since they felt that these images were intended for male consumption.

During adolescence, girls start to become aware of their own objectification, realising that their bodies are considered public property (Bloustien, 2003; K. A. Martin, 1996): "for perhaps the first time, then, an adolescent girl recognizes that she will be seen and evaluated by others *as a body*, not as herself" (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, p. 194). Adolescent girls' bodies are constantly scrutinised by children and adults (including parents, relatives, teachers and other professionals). As such, the young female body is constructed as a site of tension which is interpreted as both provocative and problematic. The objectification of girls has serious negative consequences, and adolescent girls are typically more dissatisfied with their bodies and more concerned about their weight than boys of the same age (Barker & Galambos, 2003; Phelps et al., 1993). In addition, they experience more eating problems and disorders than do boys (Crick & Zahn-Waxler, 2003).

During adolescence, girls quickly learn that it is important to appear both feminine and attractive, in order to garner the approval of others; as Pippa pointed out, "if you look nice, people will start to like you". To achieve this, girls must engage in body work, cultivating a physical appearance which is regarded as both acceptable and desirable by others. This work is often arduous and time-consuming, and it requires knowledge, skill and care to be done properly. As such, girls soon grasp that "learning to be female is hard work and that it requires a constant self-surveillance of the body to meet a ubiquitous female ideal" (Bloustien, 2003, p. 78). Pippa emphasised this beauty work in her discussion of Ariana Grande (quoted in context on p. 108): "she does take ... care of herself ... to do all her hair and everything". Ultimately, the girls constructed the female body as a site of regulation and control. This echoes Young's (1989) observation that the performance of conventional femininity is all about

managing and repressing the unruly body, in order to convey an impression of feminine respectability.

As Bourdieu (1984) argues, it is through body work that cultural capital is embodied and performed. Shilling (2012) takes this further, suggesting that the body itself can be seen as a form of physical capital. As a result, girls come to understand their bodies as commodities to be controlled, managed and exploited for personal gain. Just as the self was seen as a site of active construction, the girls understood the female body as a critical object to be developed and cultivated. Aapola et al. (2005) note that this self-objectification is part and parcel of contemporary girlhood:

Young women are encouraged to relate to their bodies as objects that exist for the use and aesthetic pleasure of others, and to work on the improvement of their appearance. The body is to be held away from oneself, considered critically and judged by its attractiveness or unattractiveness. Girls are told from a very early age to pay attention to their appearance. (p. 136)

In a sense, the girls were correct to regard their bodies as commodities, since this is how women's bodies are generally treated within wider society: "for women, the key site of transformation in a consumer culture is the body, given that women are judged by their appearance in a way that is still not the case for men" (Stevenson, 2005, p. 150). The task of upholding beauty standards is particularly urgent within the context of a capitalist patriarchy. The participants understood all too well that their value, as girls, derived primarily from their perceived attractiveness, and they understood that other people's judgements and opinions about their bodies were crucial to their own self-worth and self-esteem, as well as their broader value as members of society. For the girls, then, the body was a tool which they could use to perform a socially-accepted version of girlhood. This discourse of bodily improvement plays into the dualistic notion of the split self. Girls are taught to regard their bodies as separate from themselves, and this arguably leads to a disembodied experience of selfhood, in which the body is seen as little more than an object for self-improvement.

Overall, the girls' discussions suggest that, despite their insistence that image was of little importance to them, they were enculturated to see beauty (and also thinness) as a prerequisite of femininity, a standard which must be upheld at all costs. This reflects the socialisation that girls receive in a patriarchal society. From childhood, girls become accustomed to highly restrictive, patriarchal standards of beauty, internalising a male gaze that they use to monitor their bodies, which are viewed as a highly-prized commodity in a competitive gendered economy. The pressure to maintain beauty standards is significant in all aspects of girls' lives and, because beauty is widely assumed to be the product of self-work, being beautiful is seen as a marker of

good moral standards. The beautiful woman (or girl) represents an idealised symbol of patriarchal femininity: she is obedient, contained and submissive, living out her days in a constant struggle for perfection and self-control.

My research shows how popular music influenced my participants' beliefs about the body. Like other cultural forms, popular music contributes to a context in which girls are treated as objects and, given the importance of music in girls' lives, it is understandable that they often internalise these media messages. Within this cultural climate, girls learn to objectify themselves, performing an idealised version of femininity that is embodied through body work and beauty rituals.

Furthermore, the girls' responses show that their beliefs about female beauty shaped their interpretation of popular music texts. As Green (1997) argues, musical performance emphasises the spectacle of the body: "the intended or unintended display of the performer becomes a part of the delineated meanings of the music he or she performs" (p. 24). As a result, the girls judged female performers by the same exacting beauty standards that they applied to themselves. To an extent, they were aware that these standards were unrealistic and damaging; on the surface, they disagreed that people should be judged according to their appearance, and they acknowledged that performers like Meghan Trainor represented a healthier, more attainable beauty ideal than most other pop stars.

This, however, was not enough to challenge their ingrained beliefs about the importance of beauty. As explained throughout this chapter, girls are constantly reminded (both implicitly and explicitly) that their bodies *do* matter, and that being beautiful and thin *is* directly related to their perceived value as human beings. It is therefore unsurprising that my participants struggled to uphold the idealistic belief that image is unimportant, since this idea was at odds with their own real-life experiences (as recounted during the research). This arguably suggests that strategies to build girls' self-esteem (such as "body positive" songs and individualistic slogans of self-worth and self-confidence) do not sufficiently challenge the body image pressures that they face. As my research shows, this issue goes far beyond personalised notions of self-confidence and body positivity. Future strategies to improve girls' body image must therefore go further than this, challenging negative messages about women's bodies which link beauty with success, control, happiness and self-worth. In order to do this, such strategies must equip girls with the confidence and the skills to critically interrogate these messages in their daily lives.

7.3 Upholding gender norms

As shown above, the participants' beliefs about female performers were highly gendered, and they held these performers to extremely high standards of feminine beauty. Underlying these beliefs was a much broader gendered ideology which went beyond ideas of beauty and the physical body, and which related to ideas about how men, as well as women, should behave and present themselves. In this section, I examine the girls' wider beliefs about gender, considering their attitudes towards male and female performers and their gendered beliefs about music.

It is important to note that, while the girls focused primarily on female performers during their discussions, some of them also discussed the representation of male performers (although their concerns about male stars were very different from their concerns about female stars). In general, they had a deeply rigid understanding of masculinity, and they were extremely critical of male stars who they felt did not behave in a stereotypically "masculine" way. This is evident in the following extract, in which Jodie, Yasmin and Nadia criticise Justin Bieber and the members of One Direction for being too effeminate, and for acting "like girls".

Bridget: And you guys don't like [One Direction]? Can you explain why?

Yasmin: I don't think they're good.

Jodie: I, I think that they're, like, more like ... I don't know. They're like, I don't know, they act like girls.

Nadia: Yeah.

Yasmin: Yeah, some- ... sometimes they do.

Bridget: In what way do they act like girls?

Jodie: You know, when they sing and that, it's like Justin Bieber, he acts like a girl as well.

(All the girls start laughing)

Bridget: Do you mean they ...

Jodie: He tries sing like a girl ... especially Justin Bieber when's he's like, it's like (singing in a mocking high-pitched voice) "baby!" ... a girl.

Nadia elaborated on this in her one-to-one interview, explaining in more depth why she disliked Justin Bieber.

'Cause the way [Justin Bieber] dances, I mean, just like Jodie said last time ... when she said that he acts like a girl while he's dancing and that. And that's kind of true, you know, I mean, he dances like a girl and he just shows off more in the

songs, but apart from that ... I mean, it's been ages, I haven't seen his songs. But, I mean, I can still imagine it, that he does dance like girls. Because of his, the way he's like dancing, and he just makes me feel weird. (Nadia)

It was clear from their discussions that the girls believed that male performers should uphold patriarchal standards of masculinity, and they felt deeply uncomfortable about men who did not do this. Nadia's comment that Justin Bieber's dancing made her "feel weird" illustrates her visceral reaction to behaviour which challenged this rigid view of gender, suggesting that it made her feel physically uneasy and uncomfortable. In the quotation above, Nadia links dancing with effeminacy. Like many of the girls' beliefs, this taps into the idea of dualism, and the notion that femininity is essentially corporeal in nature (Grosz, 1994). Dancing represents an inherently bodily act, involving physical movement and the display of the body as an object of desire, pleasure and spectacle. Consequently, it was associated, by some of the girls, with femininity.

The girls in this group also identified Justin Bieber's singing voice as a sign of effeminacy, hence Jodie's mocking rendition of his 2010 hit song "Baby" (2010), which was released when Justin Bieber was just 15 years old. In this song, Justin Bieber sings in the treble range characteristic of the young, unbroken male voice. When imitating his singing, Jodie sang in an exaggerated high-pitched voice, suggesting that it was the pitch of his voice that she associated with effeminacy. Notably, this song also features the rapper Ludacris, whose adult voice provides a contrast to Justin Bieber's youthful singing (Bradby, 2017). It is also perhaps notable that, while Justin Bieber sings the melody in "Baby", Ludacris performs a rap interlude towards the end of the song. Pop songs which "feature" a rapper as well as a singer tend to be divided along gendered lines: the singer tends to be a woman, while the rapper is usually a man. In "Baby", Justin Bieber is cast in the stereotypically feminine role of the singer, and this disrupts the typical "gendered division of labour between voices" (Bradby, 2017, p. 16).

Many of the girls expressed opinions about music that reflected their rigid attitudes towards gender. For example, Vicky noted that girls and boys generally like different kinds of music. In order to explain this, she made reference to stereotypical gendered behaviours.

I think [rock music is] more for men, instead of women. Rock. Some ... women can play it, but I think it'd look better on men. Like, rock ... like, because girls like ... they're more like ... singing, like. And they, some of them like just sing instead of being hyper with rock and that. And, like ... like boys while they rock, they get more ... I don't know how to explain, like ... they connect more to rock than singing. (Vicky)

Vicky considered rock music to be an inherently masculine genre, and her description of it indicates deeply ingrained beliefs about appropriate gendered behaviour. Her suggestion that

boys like rock music because it is “hyper” probably alludes to the fact that rock is typically loud, energetic and aggressive, characteristics that Vicky clearly associated with masculinity. In contrast, she felt that “singing” would be more appealing to female listeners, and she referred to singing as a stereotypically feminine activity: “girls like ... they’re more like ... singing”. Her suggestion that boys “connect more to rock than singing” seems to imply a belief that musical preferences are somehow innate, and that boys and girls are naturally predisposed to like certain kinds of music.

Some of the girls recognised that women were excluded from certain musical styles. In their respective interviews, Jenny and Lauren acknowledged that rock music (their favourite genre) was male-dominated; however, they did not necessarily interpret this as a problem, or as an example of gender inequality. This is evident in the following excerpt from Lauren’s interview.

Lauren: I think ... there are bands that ... just there shouldn’t really be girls in, otherwise it wouldn’t, like, it wouldn’t go. Like, I think Arctic Monkeys and Green Day and Blink-182. They’re just like ... they’re just good how they are. But then, I think there should be more girls, like, in sorta like rock, rock ‘n’ roll sorta music and stuff, but I’m not like ... I’m not like bothered by it. I think if a band’s good, then it’s good without a girl or with a girl in.

Bridget: Yeah. Why do ... do you have any ideas about, like, why it might be that there aren’t many girls in rock?

Lauren: I think it’s just from ... I think it’s generally because they can’t, like ... like, say how low they might have to go. I just think they probably can’t sing, like, how they need to sing.

Here, Lauren states that, although she felt there were not enough women in rock music, she would not want to see a female performer in any of her favourite all-male bands, suggesting that the presence of a woman would make them less appealing: “there are bands that ... just there shouldn’t really be girls in, otherwise it wouldn’t, like, it wouldn’t go.” When asked why she felt rock music was so male-dominated, she suggested that this might simply be the result of innate physical differences between men and women, rather than sexism or inequality, arguing that men’s voices were more suited to rock music because of their low pitch.

Jenny also recognised that rock music was heavily male-dominated, noting that most of her favourite bands did not have any female members.

Bridget: Do you like any of the ... are any of your bands, do they have women in or is it just mainly men?

Jenny: I like Paramore.

Bridget: Paramore, yeah.

Jenny: Erm, and, well obviously Hayley Williams, and ... she's a really good singer and stuff. But mainly, no. Mainly it's men.

Bridget: ... Do you have any ideas about why it might be?

Jenny: I'm not sure. I think, 'cause there's so many men ... like, people are like "only men can do this job." Erm, or maybe girls just aren't interested in like picking up a guitar or something and learning to play or drumming.

In this extract, Jenny tentatively acknowledges that the absence of women in rock music might be the result of widespread sexist attitudes towards women: "people are like 'only men can do this job.'" However, like Lauren, she also felt that it might be a reflection of gendered differences between men and women: "maybe girls just aren't interested in like picking up a guitar or something".

As I have shown, the quotations included in this chapter indicate a belief that gender differences between men and women are innate. None of the girls mentioned the fact that boys and girls are socialised differently, or that they tend to receive very different opportunities, particularly in terms of music education and participation (Green, 1997). It was clear from their discussions that they saw gender differences as fixed and stable, rather than fluid and context-dependent, and because of this they seemed to view inequality between the sexes as natural and inevitable.

These rigid attitudes towards gender are typical for children in early adolescence. Research has shown that children's knowledge of gender stereotypes increases as they get older, and consequently children often have very prescriptive beliefs about gender. Children often socialise in sex-segregated groups, avoiding members of the opposite sex (Mehta & Strough, 2010) and, within these peer groups, they often enforce gender roles strictly, in order to maintain normative social structures and hierarchies (Galambos et al., 2009). The changes of puberty make the differences between the sexes more obvious, a process which is loaded with cultural meaning, and this has a significant impact on how children view themselves and others. Some scholars have argued that the biological changes of adolescence may heighten children's awareness of gender differences, and that this may cause them to adopt more rigid attitudes towards gender roles (Bartini, 2006, p. 244).

The girls in my study were no exception to this, and their responses reveal a strict set of beliefs about appropriate gendered behaviour for both men and women. Ultimately, they seemed to subscribe to a deeply essentialist view of gender, ascribing an innateness to learned social roles and gendered behaviours. These beliefs were underpinned by a strict patriarchal ideology which maintained the hierarchical distinction between masculinity and femininity, constructing women

as different from and inferior to men. Using popular music as a framework to explore ideas about gender, they were able to express their opinions about how men and women (and also boys and girls) should behave. By doing this, they tacitly enforced gender roles within their peer groups, demonstrating their own ability to *do* (or “perform”) gender appropriately.

8 Interpreting the Aesthetics of Popular Music

“She’s gone a bit over the top”

Since the emergence of music video in the late 1970s and early 1980s, many artists have used the medium to push the aesthetic boundaries of mainstream pop. However, in recent years, visual aesthetics in popular music have become ever more innovative and spectacular, a shift which has largely been driven by the growth of the internet and the emergence of online streaming. During the past decade, a number of high-profile female performers, including Lady Gaga, Nicki Minaj, Miley Cyrus and Katy Perry, have taken music video to another level of experimentation, creating videos which intend to shock, inspire, titillate and sometimes even disturb the viewer. All of these stars have a distinctive, eye-catching visual aesthetic, employing a theatrical performance style which involves elaborate costumes, staging and choreography. My participants were very interested in these performers, and they were discussed a great deal during the focus groups and interviews. In this chapter, I examine the girls’ attitudes towards these stars, focusing on how they interpreted meaning in their work.

8.1 Making sense of camp performances

As well as being flamboyant, stars like Lady Gaga, Nicki Minaj, Miley Cyrus and Katy Perry adopt an artificial, ironic aesthetic in their work. They are also well-known, and indeed notorious, for their sexually-provocative performances which playfully experiment with ideas of gender and sexuality. As such, the performance style employed by these artists can be interpreted as an example of camp (Horn, 2012; McMillan, 2015). Throughout this chapter, I use the word camp to describe them, since this word accurately describes the visual and semantic tone employed by these stars, situating their work within a wider tradition of performance.

Put simply, the word camp refers to a performance style that employs an inauthentic aesthetic (Bergman, 1993, pp. 4–5; Dickinson, 2001, p. 344). Camp can also be understood as a form of parody which uses irony, aestheticism, theatricality and humour (Babuscio, 1993) to mock social convention, exposing the constructedness of normative cultural images, ideas and stereotypes (Cleto, 2000, p. 164; Dyer, 2002, p. 60). Camp often focuses on gender, exaggerating traditional gender roles to enact a form of Butlerian gender critique which challenges accepted beliefs about how women and men should behave (Shugart & Waggoner, 2008; J. Taylor, 2012). Despite its origins in gay subculture (Dyer, 2002, p. 59; Hawkins, 2009,

pp. 25–27; Horn, 2012, p. 86; J. Taylor, 2012, p. 68), camp is now firmly embedded within the mainstream, and is frequently employed by female pop stars (Dickinson, 2001; Hawkins, 2004; Horn, 2012; Robertson, 1996; Shugart & Waggoner, 2008).

In general, the participants disliked stars who employed a camp aesthetic because they found their performances too flamboyant, dramatic and visually excessive. They described this performance style as “over-the-top”, and their conversations about these performers revealed an underlying sense of confusion, unease and distrust. This is particularly evident in the following extract from my focus group with Verity, Georgie and Amy. In this extract, the girls discuss a picture of Lady Gaga that one of them had brought to the focus group.

Verity: I think the way Lady Gaga dresses and what she wears is strange.

Georgie: Yeah, she wore a meat costume. That’s crazy!

Verity: I know, and here she’s got these weird old, really old weird ...

Georgie: Where?

Amy: Here. Is she wearing a wig?

Verity: Mm, I don’t know.

Amy: It looks like she’s wearing a wig.

Verity: Yeah.

Amy: It’s just weird.

Verity: The way that she’s got these weird glasses on is just strange.

This discussion illustrates the participants’ feelings of confusion and alienation when confronted with images of camp stars like Lady Gaga, and this sense of bemusement was echoed in many of the focus groups and interviews. Often, the girls’ discussions of these stars were fast-paced and lively, and they asked numerous questions about them, many of which went unanswered (“is she wearing a wig?”). They also frequently made negative statements about these performers. These statements were usually abrupt and dismissive (“it’s just weird”), and they tended to close down debate. Overall, the tone of their discussions suggested that, although the girls were clearly very curious about these camp performers, they were not necessarily able to interpret meaning in their work.

This is illustrated in the following extract from my interview with Erin, in which she criticises Katy Perry’s theatrical performance style in the music video for her song “Roar” (2013).

Erin: I like “Roar”, but the music video’s horrible.

Bridget: You don’t like it?

Erin: It’s very cheesy. I don’t like it. She’s just like (pulls exaggerated face) ... (laughs) ... it’s so fake.

Bridget: Yeah ... what’s fake about it?

Erin: It’s just, she overreacts, which is good in musical theatre, but on the screen it’s not very good. You need to overreact in musical theatre but when you’re in a film you’ve got to play it down.

Bridget: Do you think it should be a bit more understated?

Erin: Well ...

Bridget: Is it a bit ... crazy?

Erin: Well I ... I quite like it like that, the crazy side of it. But just, too much of it can make your head hurt a bit!

Erin clearly disliked Katy Perry’s excessive acting style, describing it as “overreacting”. She expressed her feelings about this in hyperbolic terms, arguing that the video made her “head hurt”, a phrase which suggests pain and frustration. In particular, she objected to the way that emotion was communicated in the video and, as a result, she found the video mawkish, false and (in her words) “cheesy”. Her use of this word is very revealing. Used in this context, the word “cheese” refers to an aesthetic style which is seen as “bad taste”, and which is hackneyed and clichéd, as well as visually ostentatious and garish. While cheese is similar to camp, it also has some crucial differences. Like camp, cheese is associated with “fakeness” and artificiality, and the word is typically used to describe a form of emotional expression which is forced and unconvincing (Oakes, 2004). However, while camp is largely seen as an ironic response to consumer culture, cheese is situated firmly within that culture; in other words, camp parodies bad taste, while cheese actually *is* in bad taste (at least, in the eyes of the viewer) (Dettmar & Richey, 1999). The main difference between camp and cheese, then, is the perceived intention of the performer.

Erin’s reference to cheese indicates that she believed the video’s excessive, over-the-top aesthetic was unintentional; in other words, she felt that the video was not well executed, since it did not convey meaning or emotion in a way that she felt was tasteful or appropriate. It is interesting that she viewed the video for “Roar” in this way, given its deliberately theatrical, humorous and almost cartoonish tone. The video presents a narrative about a woman (played by Katy Perry) who is stranded in the jungle following a plane crash. Gradually she starts to feel at home in her new surroundings, taming the wild animals around her. She is shown in a variety of

comical situations, for example, brushing a crocodile's teeth and giving an elephant a pedicure. In one eye-catching image, she appears on a throne, wearing a crown of flowers, a leopard-print bra and a grass skirt. Erin did not seem to recognise that these images were intended to be interpreted as whimsical or tongue-in-cheek, instead viewing them as garish and excessive. During the research, many of the girls expressed similar beliefs about camp performers, writing off their work as cheesy or vulgar. In general, they seemed unable to appreciate the irony, humour and theatricality of camp.

8.2 Camp and authenticity

The participants' attitudes towards camp performers were closely related to their beliefs about authenticity. In particular, they disliked the deliberately inauthentic visual aesthetic employed by these performers, describing their appearance as "fake", "over-the-top" and "too much". For example, Jodie expressed a strong dislike of Nicki Minaj's "false" image, which she said reminded her of a Barbie doll. Instead, she preferred stars like Jessie J and Cheryl Cole, who she felt had a more "natural" image.

Jodie: [Jessie J] don't go over the top. You know what I mean?

Bridget: What do you mean, like?

Jodie: Like, with big ... eyelashes and that. Like Nicki Minaj, when you compare them.

Bridget: Yeah. So do you think image is quite important for, like, a musician?

Jodie: Yeah.

Yasmin: Yeah.

Jodie: You have to be attracted to the song. Do you know what I mean? You've got to want to ... they will, if the girl looks like a, a nice person you might think, "oh, their songs might be all right."

Bridget: Yeah.

Jodie: If you see, like, some of 'em are false and that, you might think, "oh, just a Barbie doll." Kinda ...

Yasmin: ... Just, like, not fake.

Jodie: There's false and then there's over-the-top. They look like they've had surgery and that on their lips.

Bridget: Who do you think has a good image then? Do you know?

Nicole: I think Jessie J has a good image.

Jodie: She's natural-er [*sic*]. I like natural-er. Erm, Cheryl Cole. She don't go over the top.

This sentiment was echoed by Dorothy, Gemma and Holly, in their discussion of Lady Gaga's image.

Dorothy: I think, Lady Gaga, I think she's a *really* good singer, I love all her songs. I think she *is* eccentric, but I think her brand is too far. I don't think she is the person that she, like with all the clothes and stuff, I don't think she's that extreme. She might be but I can't imagine it. I think she was quite extreme and the, her producers thought "this is something we can make a lot of money out [of], let's make her even more extreme, let's give her all these crazy outfits and stuff". So she does that and then ... I mean, I admire her for ... maybe she was doing it to go to the other extreme. I used to believe that she's *exactly* like that, 'cause most people *that* crazy usually ... maybe have something ... wrong or ... like ... go to jail or stuff.

(The girls laugh)

Gemma: Yeah, I kind of agree with Dorothy, 'cause no matter how strange you are you don't usually walk around with a telephone on your head.

(More laughter)

Gemma: Which she does.

Dorothy: Yeah, and ... like most pop stars would think "oh, I think that would look nice." I don't think she *actually* looked at it and thought "that would look nice on my head" ... which is what most, like, if someone was eccentric and thought "oh, that looks nice." Like Paloma Faith, I think she's a bit eccentric ... but I think she's not as, nearly as far as Lady Gaga. Erm, so maybe she does think the things she wears look nice. I think Lady Gaga maybe looks at them and goes "that'll get me in the newspapers."

Holly: I think sometimes though it's maybe for performance. Like, she might not wear her outfits 'cause she wants to but I think she's still unique in that way, but sometimes it might just be for performance-wise. To put on the show.

Throughout this discussion, Dorothy, Gemma and Holly tried to make sense of Lady Gaga's flamboyant image, which they clearly found bewildering and alienating. Their language revolved around notions of excess, and they used words and phrases like "extreme" and "too far" to describe Lady Gaga's costumes. Because they did not recognise her image as intentionally camp or ironic, they were confused by it, and could not understand why she was dressed so outlandishly. In particular, Gemma seemed confused by the stylised telephone hat worn by Lady Gaga in the music video for "Telephone" (2010): "no matter how strange you are

you don't usually walk around with a telephone on your head." In this quotation, Gemma removes the telephone hat from the context of the music video, imagining it in an everyday context. Because she would not wear such a hat herself, she questioned why Lady Gaga would wear one in a music video. This suggests that Gemma did not recognise the aesthetic potential of this particular item of clothing, which was obviously intended as a fashion statement. The only participant who acknowledged the intentionality of Lady Gaga's camp image was Holly, who tentatively suggested that Lady Gaga might present herself in a flamboyant manner to "put on the show". However, aside from this, the other participants seemed unaware of the performativity of these images.

The girls also disliked these performers because they felt that they were not expressing their authentic selves; as Dorothy suggested, "I don't think [Lady Gaga] is the person that she, like with all the clothes and stuff, I don't think she's that extreme." This sentiment was echoed by Imogen in her discussion of Miley Cyrus. Imogen felt that, since adopting a more "over-the-top" persona, Miley Cyrus was no longer being true to herself.

I think [Miley Cyrus] was a lot more of herself ... like before she changed ... but now she just like ... I think she's gone a bit over the top, and she like ... she's not like ... got her own personality. She just doesn't really fit ... I don't really like the way she dresses ... when you look at her, you kind of like think, well you wouldn't wear that, so ... (Imogen)¹⁵

Just as Gemma could not understand why Lady Gaga would wear a telephone hat, Imogen could not understand why anyone would want to dress like Miley Cyrus: "I don't really like the way she dresses ... when you look at her, you kind of like think, well you wouldn't wear that". Like Gemma, she imagined Miley Cyrus's outlandish costumes in an everyday context, and this made them seem even more bizarre and ridiculous. Because she could not imagine wearing such an outfit herself, Imogen concluded that Miley Cyrus must be presenting a false self to the world: "she's not like ... got her own personality". Arguably, this suggests a lack of awareness of cultural context, since it is normal for pop stars to wear unusual, elaborate costumes, particularly when performing.

This interpretation recalls Moore's (2002) notion of first person authenticity – specifically the idea that art should represent the originator's inner self. As I have shown throughout this thesis, the girls viewed music through the lens of first person authenticity and, because of this, they valued music primarily for its ability to communicate the performer's thoughts, feelings and emotions. First person authenticity offers a simplistic moral approach to the interpretation of cultural texts, which effectively asks "is this person telling the truth?" This echoes Frith's

¹⁵ This quotation is also featured on p. 77.

(1996) observation that listeners' judgements about music are shaped by their beliefs about human behaviour, particularly those relating to truth and honesty:

It's as if people expect music to mean what it says, however cynical that meaning, and music can be heard as being "false" to its own premises. How do people hear music in such an ethical way? What is it about a record that makes us say, "I just don't believe it!" ...? This is obviously related somehow to the ways in which we judge people's sincerity generally; it is a human as well as a musical judgement.
(p. 71)

In this way, first person authenticity relates to morality, and this simplistic approach may appeal to younger listeners. As I have shown, my young participants were very interested in moral matters, and they discussed their "black-and-white" moral beliefs in a deeply earnest manner.

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the girls responded to camp performances with a mixture of derision and distrust, since these performances challenged their deeply-held beliefs about authenticity. The work of camp performers like Lady Gaga, Nicki Minaj, Miley Cyrus and Katy Perry invites a complex semantic reading which goes beyond the traditional Romantic notion of emotional expression. Furthermore, camp revels in its own ambiguity, unashamedly celebrating its artificiality; as Dickinson (2001) notes, "camp disregards standard modes of readership and gives its objects subversive qualities without worrying about whether they are 'authentic'" (p. 344). Consequently, camp performances can be read as either normative or resistant, depending on the subject position of the viewer. This can lead some to reject camp, since not all audiences recognise the deliberate irony of camp aesthetics (Dickinson, 2001, p. 345; Horn, 2012, p. 94). As shown throughout this chapter, the participants in my study were unaware of the aesthetic possibilities of camp, and, as a result, they found it hard to connect emotionally with camp musical performances.

In this way, my work demonstrates the limitations of first person authenticity. Perhaps most significantly, first person authenticity did not offer the girls an adequate framework for the interpretation of experimental or polysemous works which transcend Romantic models of emotional communication. Another relevant factor may also have been the age of my participants, since the girls' relative cultural inexperience may have made it difficult for them to interpret camp aesthetics. In order to understand camp, audiences must have an understanding of concepts such as irony, parody and aestheticism. Camp texts are also often intertextual, requiring audiences to have a broad cultural knowledge. At just 10 to 13 years old, my participants may not have come into contact with many semantically complex works, and because of this they may not have had the necessary cultural knowledge to make sense of referential camp performances. In many ways, the girls' opinions about camp recall their

opinions about narrativity and the communication of meaning in music (as discussed in Chapter 4); in general, they liked simple music with a clear meaning that could be easily understood.

8.3 A gendered view of camp

It is worth noting that all of the performers identified by the participants as “over-the-top” were women, and it was clear that they viewed these performers through a gendered lens. These female stars challenged the girls’ beliefs about how women should behave and present themselves, and this led the girls to condemn them. As discussed in Chapter 7, the girls valued femininity very highly and felt that women should maintain a stereotypically feminine appearance at all times. On the other hand, they disliked women who took this too far, adopting a hyper-feminine image.

They call [Nicki Minaj] the drag queen, like she goes over the top. (Jodie)

Jodie’s scathing reference to Nicki Minaj as a drag queen is particularly revealing, given that drag has historically been associated with camp (Newton, 1993). By enacting an exaggerated performance of femininity (often involving makeup, flamboyant hairstyles and hyper-feminine clothing), drag queens adopt a camp aesthetic, sending up gender stereotypes (Schacht & Underwood, 2004). Drag is by nature inauthentic, since it involves a performer taking on an alternative identity, and it is therefore incompatible with simplistic notions of first person authenticity. As such, the girls’ beliefs about female beauty were fundamentally at odds with the stylised hyper-femininity of drag, and with the deliberately artificial image of camp stars like Nicki Minaj. Moreover, the sexually-provocative, barely-there costumes and heavy makeup worn by these stars did not fit with the girls’ beliefs about acceptable demure womanhood and “natural” feminine beauty.

This idea was echoed by Jade, Sophie and Phoebe in their discussion of Lady Gaga. Just as Jodie compared Nicki Minaj to a drag queen, Jade questioned whether Lady Gaga was even a woman at all.

Jade: People started thinking that [Lady Gaga] was a man.

Sophie: (Laughs)

Jade: And then, no, because like ...

Phoebe: ‘Cause she was so over-the-top.

Sophie: She can't sing.

Jade: And, like, she was wearing really lady things, so people started thinking that she was a man and pretending to be a lady.

It is clear from this discussion that the girls had a gendered view of Lady Gaga's flamboyant image. Interestingly, it was the excessive hyper-femininity of her appearance that made them question her womanhood: "she was wearing really lady things, so people started thinking that she was a man and pretending to be a lady." This again recalls the idea of drag, and the belief that women should look effortlessly and "naturally" feminine, rather than theatrical, dramatic or heavily made-up. This conversation also indicates that the girls were engaged with mainstream media coverage of Lady Gaga's career. In 2009, there was a well-publicised, but also light-hearted, rumour that Lady Gaga was a man. Despite the absurdity of this rumour (which was started by individuals posting on gossip websites) it became a talking point in interviews with Lady Gaga at the time ("Lady Gaga gags hermaphrodite rumours," 2009; "Lady Gaga 'loves hermaphrodite rumour,'" 2010). Although it was never taken seriously in the media, this rumour arguably exposes a wider discourse of anxiety surrounding Lady Gaga's unconventional image. It may be that the girls in my study had picked up on society's discomfort about women like Lady Gaga who challenge accepted ideas about how women should act.

The girls also disliked female performers who were deemed to be too assertive, aggressive or disruptive, since this behaviour was interpreted as "unfeminine". This is demonstrated in the following quotations about Nicki Minaj.

[Nicki Minaj is] a bit too like *bang!* Like, she's too much in your face sometimes. (Leanne)

But Nicki Minaj just ... sometimes she just goes a bit too far. (Leanne)

The way [Nicki Minaj] acts on her videos and like a bit in your face, like she's pushing it to you, like. (Vicky)

[Nicki Minaj] throws it out 'ere! Like. (Laughs) ... (Vicky)

The language used by Leanne and Vicky to describe Nicki Minaj played on ideas of excess – particularly their use of phrases such as "too much" and "too far". Their language also invoked ideas of aggression and force. For example, both Leanne and Vicky described Nicki Minaj as being "in your face", a phrase which conjures up the image of an imposing figure who dominates others through forceful or unwelcome behaviour; indeed, the metaphor itself suggests the idea of unwanted physicality or proximity since, in a literal sense, it refers to the act of getting too close to someone. Vicky described Nicki Minaj as "pushing it to you", a phrase which suggests unwanted physical action. Both phrases use verbs ("push" and "throw") to

denote an action which encroaches on an imagined recipient: “in *your* face”, “pushing it to *you*”. Vicky’s suggestion that Nicki Minaj “throws it out ‘ere” creates a similar impression, suggesting behaviour that is wild, wanton and uncontrolled. Overall, this language indicates a belief that artists who perform in an excessive style are domineering, imposing and unfeminine. Ultimately, this reflects a patriarchal standard of femininity, which demands that women should be submissive, compliant and docile.

The girls also associated this “over-the-top” behaviour with insanity and deviance, and they frequently used the word “crazy” to describe performers like Lady Gaga. Dorothy, for example, implied that, because of her unconventional appearance, Lady Gaga might be mentally unwell, or a dangerous criminal.

... most people that crazy usually ... maybe have something ... wrong or ... like ... go to jail or stuff. (Dorothy)¹⁶

Phoebe, Jade and Sophie had a very similar discussion about Lady Gaga during their own focus group. In this fast-paced, humorous exchange, they remarked on the perceived strangeness of her costumes.

Phoebe: I don’t like Lady Gaga.

Bridget: What’s wrong with [her]? ...

Phoebe: ... She, she doesn’t wear clothes, she wears *meat*.

Sophie: She wears material.

Phoebe: She doesn’t wear clothes. She’s in hot-pants ...

Jade: No, she got taken away, no she got ...

This extract shows that the girls saw Lady Gaga’s clothing as evidence of her supposed “craziness”. Jade’s reference to Lady Gaga being “taken away” invokes the idea of being imprisoned or sectioned, conjuring up notions of criminality and insanity. Arguably, this suggests that the girls were unaware that Lady Gaga’s image is meant to appear somewhat “crazy”; indeed, her theatrical stage costumes are often highly experimental and are clearly intended to make a statement (particularly the infamous meat dress, discussed on p. 81).

In a similar discussion, Summer and Zara accused Rihanna of being “crazy”.

Summer: See I used to like Rihanna a lot. I do still but she’s just gone a bit ...

¹⁶ This quotation appears in context on p. 130.

Zara: Crazy.

Summer: Crazy, yeah.

Later in the same focus group, the girls (Zara, Summer, Rochelle and Pippa) also branded Britney Spears “crazy”.

Zara: I hate ... erm, what’s her name? Er, Britney Spear [*sic*].

Bridget: Yeah?

Rochelle: Yeah.

Zara: And I don’t like her.

Summer: Er, no, I don’t like her, no.

Bridget: What don’t you like about her?

Summer: She’s cr-, another cra-, crazy woman.

Zara: Crazy.

Bridget: Yeah?

Zara: Unappropriate [*sic*]. Erm, her songs is ... stupid. That’s what I think.

Summer: She’s proper, proper crazy though, though.

Bridget: In what way ... d’you think?

Summer: Like ...

Zara: Her songs.

Bridget: Yeah?

Summer: She, like, the way she carries herself, like, the way, like, when she’s singing and stuff, the way she just moves herself. Stuff like that.

Pippa: Mm.

Summer: She’s proper crazy.

This conversation suggests that the girls in this focus group were aware of the media coverage which has surrounded Britney Spears over the years. During the early 2000s, Britney Spears struggled with personal problems and mental illness, and this was widely reported in the tabloid media at the time. It is possible, then, that they may have used the word “crazy” literally, to reference her well-known personal difficulties.

In many ways, this negative characterisation of Britney Spears echoes the original media coverage of her mental health problems; the participants described her as a dangerously unstable or “insane” woman, invoking age-old misogynistic attitudes towards women whose behaviour deviates from socially-accepted standards of femininity (Little Fenimore, 2012). As Showalter (1993) and Driscoll (2002) note, women have historically been marginalised, demonised and pathologised as “hysterical” and “deviant” for behaving in ways which challenge patriarchal notions of feminine modesty, obedience and submissiveness. In this way, the girls’ negative attitudes towards female performers such as Britney Spears suggest that, although they may not have been consciously aware of it, their beliefs were profoundly shaped by patriarchal ideology.

8.4 Acting “cool”

In contrast with camp, “over-the-top” performers, the participants generally preferred stars with a more restrained, naturalistic aesthetic. In particular, many of the girls expressed a preference for Adele and Sam Smith, performers who were characterised as more moderate and relaxed.

[Adele’s] a good singer and she doesn’t ... she’s not that fake, she’s like ... she doesn’t go over the top with her music ... yeah, she’s natural. (Yasmin)

And Sam Smith, he’s a good singer. Yeah, the way he ... he doesn’t go over the top. (Yasmin)

Adele and Sam Smith both employ a relatively pared-down visual aesthetic in their work. In terms of their image, they wear relaxed, modest clothing which would not look out of place in an ordinary everyday setting. Their music videos tend to be fairly simple, and they often feature the singer performing in a concert-style setting, which evokes a sense of realism. Adele, in particular, has cultivated a star image which plays on ideas of “ordinariness”, and she is well-known for her down-to-earth personality, strong regional accent and sense of humour. Suhadolnik (2016) argues that Adele’s persona has consistently been defined in opposition to other more flamboyant pop stars such as Lady Gaga, noting that, in the media, Adele is presented as “a welcome alternative to hypersexualised, spectacle-driven pop” (p. 185).

The girls also interpreted Adele and Sam Smith’s music as more subtle, restrained and understated than the music of other stars. For example, Phoebe stated that she liked the minimal orchestration in Sam Smith’s music.

You know like some people have, like, backing tracks, so they don’t have to have all the instruments there when they play. When Sam Smith does it, he has all the

instruments there and he doesn't change anything. It's just him and his voice and an orchestra, and it's like they're all there. He doesn't change it at all. (Phoebe)

Here Phoebe emphasises the pared-down (or “stripped-back”) sound of Sam Smith’s music. Rather than using electronically-generated sounds (which she referred to as “backing tracks”), Phoebe noted that Sam Smith’s music mainly used acoustic instruments, which crucially can be seen by the audience: “it’s just him and his voice and an orchestra, and it’s like they’re all there”. In Phoebe’s eyes, this provided evidence that the sound had not be digitally altered, and this was very important to her: “he doesn’t change it at all.” This invokes the idea of musical authenticity – specifically, the notion that technology interferes with authentic musical expression, corrupting the supposed “unmediated” communication of ideas and emotions (Frith, 1986; Moore, 2002).

Overall, the quotations featured in this chapter demonstrate the participants’ preference for music with a restrained aesthetic. Performers with an excessive visual aesthetic were characterised as inauthentic, threatening, aggressive, deviant, pathologically unstable, overly-feminine and also, paradoxically, unfeminine. In contrast, performers with a more restrained aesthetic were seen as more authentic and down-to-earth.

This indicates that the participants had strict beliefs about how people should behave. Specifically, it suggests a preference for a style of behaviour involving restraint, control and the regulation of the body. This behavioural style is synonymous with the idea of “coolness”. Haselstein and Hijiya-Kirschner (2013) define “cool” as “a metaphorical term for affect control ... [which] is tied in with cultural discourses on the emotions and the norms of their public display, and with gendered cultural practices of subjectivity” (p. 1). Coolness is a highly-valued quality within adolescent peer groups, since it confers status and prestige. In her study of girlhood and identity, Bloustien (2003) found that her young female participants were eager to perform coolness in their interactions with others. For Bloustien’s participants, coolness was “an image of superiority which, although supposedly authentic and innate, was also paradoxically understood to be mainly constituted through style and demeanour” (p. 191). In order to convey an impression of coolness, they sought to demonstrate self-possession and self-control: “what was important ... was to appear self-contained, at ease with oneself, nonchalantly unselfconscious, a strong independent individual” (p. 192). My research builds on this idea, demonstrating the central importance, for girls, of appearing in control of one’s body and faculties. Despite the fact that coolness is represented by a learned set of behaviours, the girls in my study felt that it should appear natural and effortless. Arguably, this explains why they preferred stars like Adele and Sam Smith, who were seen as down-to-earth and laid-back (or “cool”).

In a sense, this idea of coolness reflects the gendered expectations placed on women within a patriarchal culture, such as the pressure to remain calm, composed and self-possessed at all times. As well as stifling difficult emotions, such as anger, sadness and frustration, girls are expected to monitor their behaviour, speech and appearance constantly. Moreover, they are expected to manage and repress the physical body, appearing physically collected at all times; as Bloustien (2003) notes, this can prove challenging for girls within a world that is specifically tailored to the needs of the male body (pp. 103–104). In this way, the girls' beliefs about pop music reflected their wider beliefs about how women should behave in everyday life, and their standards of appropriate feminine behaviour. By exploring their attitudes towards visually excessive, over-the-top female stars, my research shows how the girls enforced gender norms through their discussions about music, perpetuating a gendered discourse of restraint and control. This arguably reflects the patriarchal climate of restriction surrounding the girls, and the highly constrained view of femininity that was offered to them by the popular media.

9 Femininity and Objectification

“The sad thing is ... [Miley Cyrus] used to be so nice and stuff”

When viewing contemporary music videos, it is difficult to ignore the sexualised imagery which has come to dominate popular music. In recent decades, the content of popular music has become increasingly sexualised, and this has made many adults uneasy about children’s engagement with music. In the following chapter, I investigate how the girls in my study made sense of this imagery, exploring their opinions about the sexualisation of popular culture.

9.1 The objectification of female pop stars

My participants were clearly very concerned about this issue, and they introduced it in almost all of the focus groups and interviews without being prompted. They universally condemned the sexualised content of popular music, arguing that it was dangerous and problematic, and expressing feelings of distaste, disgust and disapproval about it.

Miley Cyrus, I used to love, but then she turned like into this and I, I like the songs, some of them, but I don’t like the videos and I don’t like her ... it’s just ... it’s a bit sexual. (Jo)

... when you see people not wearing many clothes, sometimes I don’t really like some stuff that Jessie J or Miley Cyrus wears ... sometimes they just show too much. (Imogen)

Notably, they seemed to lack the language required to discuss this content. Instead, they relied on vague, ambiguous words, such as “inappropriate”, “strange”, “weird” and “rude”.

Clare: Some music [videos are] all right but ...

Summer: But some are just ... like sometimes a bit rude.

Zara: Ridiculous.

Summer: Yeah, like the “Anaconda”¹⁷ one. That’s just rude.

Pippa: Yeah, that’s rude.

¹⁷ Nicki Minaj’s song “Anaconda” was discussed a great deal by the participants because of its highly sexualised content. The lyrics of “Anaconda” discuss sex, drug use and violence, fetishising the female buttocks as the focal point of male desire. The music video plays on this idea, featuring images of scantily-clad women in sexually-provocative poses. Throughout the video, the camera lingers on the women’s bodies, which are fragmented into distinct body parts. This visual technique draws on the aesthetics of pornography, objectifying the female body for male consumption (Railton & Watson, 2011, p. 80).

Zara: It's not appropriate.

Summer: Exactly.

The following quotation from my interview with Chloe demonstrates this evasive use of language. In it, Chloe explains that she actively avoids listening to “rude” songs because they make her feel uneasy.

I dunno, I don't like listening to rude stuff. Because I'm just like “urgh, turn it off.” Because it's a bit weird, I think. But ... yeah, because nice songs you can talk about, but weird songs you don't really want to talk about with your friends that much. Or you might discuss how it's bad and stuff. And a bit weird but ... my friend just listens to the new stuff on YouTube. And I know my parents wouldn't want me to listen to rude stuff, and stuff, so I try to avoid them, and when I watch them sometimes with like, at my friends, I feel quite bad afterwards. (Chloe)

This quotation demonstrates Chloe's visceral reaction to this media content, as well as the difficulty she had in expressing her feelings. This is unsurprising, given that adolescent girls often find it hard to articulate their feelings about issues relating to gender and sexuality; as Tolman (2002) and K. A. Martin (1996) note, girls are often ill-equipped to deal with the consequences of living in a hyper-sexualised culture which objectifies women and girls. Within this context, girls often struggle to develop a sense of sexual subjectivity and, as a result, they sometimes find it hard to articulate their fears and anxieties about sexuality (Aapola et al., 2005, p. 165).

The girls also drew on the language of morality to express their disapproval, using words such as “dirty”, “disgusting”, “wrong”, “horrible” and “trashy” to describe pop stars who presented themselves in a sexually-provocative manner. These terms play on notions of shame, disgust, contamination and sexual deviance, invoking traditional discourses of sexual morality. This is evident in the following extract, in which Monica, Fiona and Molly discuss Miley Cyrus's video for “Wrecking Ball” (2013b).¹⁸

Monica: And probably it's gonna be like in the magazines, like. Because when “Wrecking Ball” came out it was all over, how wrong it was.

Fiona: Miley Cyrus!

Molly: Urgh, Miley Cyrus. I loved her as Hannah Montana and now she's grown into, urgh! I'd say a horrible girl.

Fiona: Yeah.

¹⁸ The music video for Miley Cyrus's song “Wrecking Ball” caused considerable controversy when it was released in 2013. The video features images of Miley Cyrus swinging naked on a wrecking ball and licking a hammer provocatively. It was directed by the photographer Terry Richardson, who is known for his sexually-suggestive photographs of young female celebrities.

Monica: Yeah. She's horrible.

Pippa, Summer and Zara expressed similar feelings about Miley Cyrus. In the following extract, they discuss Miley Cyrus's infamous performance with Robin Thicke at the 2013 MTV Video Music Awards, during which she appeared in a skin-coloured PVC bikini, simulating sex acts with a giant foam finger.

Summer: [Miley Cyrus] wears stuff that goes up her bum. That's not appropriate.

Pippa: Yeah. Especially twerking.

Summer: (Laughs) And with that finger thing on her hand.

Pippa: Oh!

Summer: (Laughs)

Later in the focus group, Summer and Zara discussed the music video for Miley Cyrus's song "We Can't Stop" (2013a), which features images of female dancers twerking.¹⁹

Summer: "Red cups and sweaty bodies everywhere." That song ... she kisses girls and everything ... and licks stomachs.

Zara: Urgh!

Summer: ... we're watching it, we're only young ... that is just disgusting to be seeing, not just for our age but any age, it's just gross.

The participants were especially critical of stars who they felt had *changed* their image, particularly if they had abandoned a wholesome image to take on a more sexually-provocative persona. In the following two quotations, Selma and Clare bemoan the fact that Ariana Grande and Nicki Minaj (respectively) have "grown up", adopting a more sexualised image.

Before [Ariana Grande] was ... I don't really like her image. I used to like it but now I don't really like it because when she played in this, erm, er, Disney ... video, erm, film, she was like nice and sweet then. But now she's, erm, changed into a different person and now ... her, her voice is very good but she's just changed into a very different person ... her actions have very ... really changed ... like she would've like ... do normal ... in the old, old times ... she would do a good video, but now she does very bad ones. Like, erm, she does very dirty ones as well.
(Selma)

Nicki Minaj? She's ... she used to be, like, a good ... a great inspiration to me, like. She used to wear nice clothes ... but now she's grown up more, she's getting like more inappropriate too, her music videos and stuff. (Clare)

¹⁹ Twerking is a hip-hop dance move, typically performed by women, which involves fast-paced hip thrusting and the shaking of the buttocks. Twerking has become increasingly visible within popular culture in recent years, having been popularised by stars such as Beyoncé, Nicki Minaj and Miley Cyrus.

This sense of disappointment was most acute in their discussions of Miley Cyrus. Many of the girls had grown up watching *Hannah Montana*, a light-hearted children's sitcom starring Miley Cyrus as the show's eponymous heroine, a teenage country singer. Almost all of the girls were horrified by Miley Cyrus's recent transformation from family-friendly child star to raunchy pop star. As well as wearing revealing outfits, Miley Cyrus had taken on a stereotypically "transgressive" image, sporting a new short hairstyle and several prominent tattoos and piercings. She had also started to speak openly about her sexuality and drug-taking, and this had caused some controversy, given her status as a former child star. For my participants, this challenging new image was at odds with their established view of Miley Cyrus as the clean-living teen star they had come to know and love. Consequently, they judged her more harshly than other pop stars, expressing an intense sense of disappointment and disapproval about her new image.

[Miley Cyrus is] quite annoying. And a bit scary. I wish she was Hannah Montana still. (Jenny)

Miley Cyrus, I used to love, but then she turned like into this, and I, I like the songs, some of them, but I don't like the videos and I don't like her ... it's just ... it's a bit sexual. (Jo)

When discussing Miley Cyrus, the girls stressed the idea of agency, arguing that she was in complete control of her image. Because of this, they felt that she must have actively chosen to adopt a hyper-sexualised image, and that she must have made this decision independently, without input from anyone else. Reflecting on this, the girls expressed a deep sense of disappointment that she had not chosen a different path, and they suggested various alternative choices that they felt she could have made instead.

Like Miley Cyrus did the "Wrecking Ball" one, like. She could've like ... instead of being like naked, she could've put full clothes on and did that, like. (Vicky)

The way [Miley Cyrus] portrays herself is just ... I understand that she's trying to get rid of the Disney image, but she could do something different. (Fiona)

The sad thing is ... she used to be so nice and stuff. As Hannah Montana and stuff. And I don't know why. She could've, erm ... maybe just sung still nice songs and stuff, but not have to, like, make everything think she's changed. (Chloe)

I quite like [Miley Cyrus's] songs but like the videos that she does, I don't like them. 'Cause they're a bit weird ... she only changed her image 'cause she wanted to be herself and she didn't want to be known as Hannah Montana anymore. So that's why she changed her image, but I think she should've just ... stayed the same and just wrote different songs. (Sophie)

In these quotations, the girls invoke a neoliberal conception of agency, stressing Miley Cyrus's responsibility, as an individual, for her own destiny. In the eyes of the participants, Miley Cyrus was solely responsible for her choices, and they viewed these choices in a vacuum, without considering how they might be affected by external societal conditions. In this way, they expressed a clear moral position which was very easy for them to articulate and uphold. Ultimately, this allowed them to condemn Miley Cyrus personally, without having to confront any wider issues surrounding the representation of women in the media. This simplistic perspective is arguably reassuring, since it relies on an assumption that all individuals are autonomous. By adopting this position, the girls avoided having to address an uncomfortable truth: that people are not always in control of their lives.

Recent revelations about the treatment of women in the entertainment industries contradict the girls' belief that female stars have autonomy over their image. In her 2013 BBC 6 Music John Peel Lecture, Charlotte Church recounted her experiences as a young singer, noting that young women in the industry are encouraged to present themselves as "sex objects that appear child-like", and that they are routinely "coerced into sexually demonstrative behaviour in order to hold on to their careers" ("Charlotte Church attacks 'sexist' music industry," 2013). Around this time, singer Sinéad O'Connor became involved in this debate when she published an open letter to Miley Cyrus in which she suggested that Miley Cyrus was being "pimped", "prostituted" and "exploited" by industry professionals (O'Connor, 2013). Despite her initial dismissive response to this letter, Miley Cyrus has subsequently expressed regret about the way she was presented at this point in her career, admitting that she now feels she was portrayed as a sex object for public consumption:

It became something that was expected of me. I didn't want to show up to photo shoots and be the girl who would get my tits out and stick out my tongue. In the beginning, it was kind of like saying, "Fuck you. Girls should be able to have this freedom or whatever." But it got to a point where I did feel sexualized. (Miley Cyrus, quoted in Pressler, 2017, para. 16)

These first-hand testimonies suggest that female performers (particularly those who are very young) often have very little control over their image or musical output, since they are often under considerable pressure to conform to the expectations of older (often male) industry professionals. Moreover, audiences have become used to a highly glamorised, sexualised aesthetic, and have been trained to expect female performers to live up to an idealised, eroticised feminine ideal.

In general, the girls seemed to identify with Miley Cyrus. Many of them seemed to admire her as an older female role model, and several of them explicitly expressed an affinity with her,

having grown up watching *Hannah Montana*. This may explain why they were so concerned about her image, and why they expressed such a personal sense of betrayal about her recent transformation.

The girls' beliefs about Miley Cyrus were based around notions of growth, change, development and transformation, ideas which were fundamental to their understanding of selfhood. Ultimately, their beliefs revolved around the distinction between childhood and adulthood, and their anxieties surrounding the transition between these two states. The girls expressed regret that Miley Cyrus had grown up, and that she had rejected her previous youthful persona in favour of a more "adult" image. At just 10 to 13 years old, the girls were themselves on the cusp of adolescence, a period of transition when children first begin to contemplate their future as adults. Their opinions about Miley Cyrus arguably reveal their conflicted feelings about growing up, and their ambivalence, and also anxiety, about adult womanhood.

Driscoll (2002) notes that, while masculine adolescence tends to be interpreted positively as a journey to adult male subjectivity, feminine adolescence is typically seen as a problematic phase, during which girls must navigate the difficult transition from innocent childhood to sexualised womanhood, a process which denies the possibility of female subjectivity (p. 57). During adolescence, girls become aware of their subordinate status within a patriarchal culture which demands that they remain passive, compliant and obedient (Seaton, 2005, pp. 29–30). De Beauvoir (1949/2009) describes this process in *The Second Sex*, characterising adolescent girlhood as a time of fear and loss, when girls must come to terms with their destiny:

For the girl ... there is a divorce between her properly human condition and her feminine vocation. This is why adolescence is such a difficult and decisive moment for woman. Until then she was an autonomous individual: she now has to renounce her sovereignty. Not only is she torn like her brothers, and more acutely, between past and future, but in addition a conflict breaks out between her originary claim to be subject, activity and freedom, on the one hand and, on the other, her erotic tendencies and the social pressure to assume herself as a passive object. She spontaneously grasps herself as the essential: how will she decide to become the inessential? If I can accomplish myself only as the *Other*, how will I renounce my *Self*? Such is the agonising dilemma the woman-to-be must struggle with. Wavering from desire to disgust, from hope to fear, rebuffing what she invites, she is still suspended between the moment of childish independence and that of feminine submission. (p. 359)

It is unsurprising that many girls feel ambivalent about growing up in a culture which promotes confusing and contradictory ideas about femininity and female sexuality. Girls quickly learn that being feminine is a difficult and dangerous task, and that they are expected to cultivate an image which is both chaste and desirable. Stars like Miley Cyrus have come to embody these tensions, offering a stylised, pre-packaged brand of sexualised femininity. In many ways, these

young female pop stars serve as potent symbols of girlhood, on to which society's deep-rooted anxieties about girls are inscribed (Dougher & Pecknold, 2016; McNicholas Smith, 2017).

During adolescence, girls begin to understand the cultural meanings attached to adult womanhood, and this can make the prospect of adulthood seem daunting. In her study of children's attitudes towards sexuality, K. A. Martin (1996) found that girls generally interpret puberty as an unpleasant and frightening experience, since it represents an initiation into the realm of adult female sexuality (p. 15). As girls grow older, they begin to see that female sexuality is denigrated by the wider culture, and that it is associated with "dirt, shame, taboo, and danger" (K. A. Martin, 1996, p. 15). This can cause girls to dislike and objectify their bodies, and consequently they often emerge from adolescence feeling less confident and self-assured than they did as children (K. A. Martin, 1996, p. 15).

This arguably explains the participants' highly negative, visceral reaction to the sexualised imagery of popular music. For the girls, this imagery represented a denigrated version of submissive womanhood, which they recognised as disempowering and degrading. As young women on the cusp of adolescence, who were likely beginning to come to terms with their future as adult women, it is understandable that they might want to distance themselves from this view of womanhood.

9.2 The influence of media images

The girls' opposition to the sexualised content of popular music was not just based on feelings of fear and disgust; they also had tangible concerns about how this imagery might influence people in the real world. Specifically, they were concerned that younger children might mimic the behaviour they saw in music videos. In the following extract, Pippa and Summer discuss this, arguing that children might copy Miley Cyrus's sexually-provocative dancing.

Pippa: Like, six-year-olds listen to Miley Cyrus and stuff, and they like watch her videos and it's ... inappropriate [*sic*] for them ...

Summer: ... they could start doing it themselves [*sic*].

Pippa: Yeah.

Summer: Like copying, 'cause like, when little kids like copying dances, or ... just like copying what they do, then they could just start doing it. And that's just wrong.

Sophie, Phoebe, Jade and Helen also expressed this belief, insisting that Miley Cyrus's video for "Wrecking Ball" was not suitable for young children.

Sophie: ... it's like not a good ...

Phoebe: Little children, well not little ...

Jade: It's not a good image for young people.

Helen: People our age.

Phoebe: ... young children, or maybe, like, slightly younger than us, like ...

Sophie: Like, they might have older brothers and sisters, eight-year-olds or whatever.

Phoebe: They watch it and then it sets a ... bad example for when they grow up.

Girls, in particular, were seen as naïve and impressionable, and it was assumed that young female music fans would be more likely to copy the behaviour of pop stars than older male fans. In the following extract, Jenny, Nora, Lauren and Lily discuss this, suggesting that young girls are likely to be influenced by the content of popular music. Conversely, they suggest that rock fans (who, notably, tend to be older and male) are not likely to be influenced by the content of rock music, or by the behaviour of rock stars.

Nora: Like, like some people say like, "Oh my god, [Miley Cyrus is] a idiot. Like, what the hell?" But, like, people take it literally, like copy off her and stuff ...

Jenny: Yeah.

Lauren: But then like, saying that though, there's like ... loads of like proper like rock bands and stuff, and like David Bowie, in like the seventies and stuff, and like he was all drugs and that.

Jenny: But I, I don't think people that listen to, like, rock music are as easily influenced.

Lauren: No, 'cause they're not like, like ...

Jenny: 'Cause, er, most of like Miley Cyrus's fans'll be like, young girls, or like ...

Lauren: Who want to be just like her.

Jenny: Yeah, who want to be just like her.

Bridget: How old do you think, like? A lot younger than you or ...?

Lauren: I think, like ...

Jenny: I think, like ...

Lauren: ... not necessarily ... a lot younger than us but like ... I think there'll be girls that watched her as, like, Hannah Montana ...

Jenny: Hannah Montana.

Lauren: ... and then they'll see her now and they'll be like ...

Jenny: "Oh that must be good."

Lauren: Like, "Oh my God. Like, I, I wanted to be Hannah Montana when I was like ..."

Jenny: Seven, yeah.

Lauren: "... seven, but now I want to be Miley Cyrus."

The girls were convinced that music videos had the power to influence young people. They provided evidence of this throughout their discussions, telling stories about friends and acquaintances who had copied things they had seen in pop music.

But Nicki Minaj is not good 'cause my little cousin and her friends have copied the video to "Anaconda" and it's not very good. Because it's rude. (Summer)

I heard someone, they copied, they have the same colour hair as her so they cut, they like cut it ... like her and take photos of themselves doing the tongue thing and stuff. (Lily)

While they were mostly concerned that young girls might be tempted to copy the provocative behaviour of female pop stars, some of the participants were equally concerned that boys might be influenced by the objectified images of women that now dominate music videos. In particular, they were worried that this content might encourage boys to view women and girls as sex objects, not only in the media but also in their everyday lives.

I think that men and boys expect the girls to dress, erm, like with less clothing on and a bit ... be a bit more sexual towards them and ... and the Grammy Awards and she was twerking on Robin Thicke, Miley Cyrus ... it wasn't very good. (Jo)

Again, some of the girls provided evidence to back up these concerns. For instance, Jenny explained that she had recently watched the video for "Anaconda" with a group of male friends. This had made her feel uncomfortable because she felt that the video was encouraging boys to objectify girls. She also felt that some of her male friends lacked the necessary skills to view the video from a critical distance, and because of this she was concerned that they would "take it seriously".

Some of [the boys will] just think nothing of it and, like, just laugh about it, like some of the boys I'm friends with. But we watched the video on a lunchtime together to laugh at it, you know, 'cause it's like, it's so stupid. But, erm, I think some of them take it seriously. And it's like, *don't* ... they look at girls' butts more and things like that. And they ... they just like take it seriously (laughs slightly).
(Jenny)

These beliefs tap into a wider discourse which maintains that popular music is partially responsible for the “sexualisation” of children. This discourse relies on a belief that children are inappropriately and prematurely sexualised through exposure to images associated with adult sexuality, particularly through contact with the media. This process is generally understood to be harmful to children (Duschinsky, 2013; Egan, 2013). The idea of sexualisation generates a sense of threat, constructing popular culture as a dangerous force which threatens the safety of children, particularly girls (Egan, 2013; Renold, Egan, & Ringrose, 2015; Renold & Ringrose, 2013). In this way, girls are cast as victims of popular culture, and they are seen as vulnerable, naïve and passive.

In recent years, this discourse has come to dominate debates about children and the media. Since the turn of the new millennium, concern about sexualisation has come from a range of different constituencies spanning the political spectrum, with journalists, campaigners and parents' groups arguing that children are being encouraged to “grow up too fast”. Because of this public concern, the issue of child sexualisation has drawn the attention of politicians. Successive UK governments (including the New Labour government of the late 1990s and early 2000s, and the subsequent Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition) have pursued policies which aim to address the problem of sexualisation (Bragg & Buckingham, 2009; C. Smith & Attwood, 2011). Interest in this issue came to a head in 2010, when the coalition government commissioned two controversial reviews of the issue: the much-criticised Bailey Review (2011) by Reg Bailey (the then Chief Executive of the Mothers' Union, a Christian charity) and the Sexualization of Young People Review (2010) by the popular psychologist Linda Papadopoulos. Both of these reports implicated popular music, and particularly music videos, as key causes of sexualisation. In the same year, the hugely popular online parenting forum Mumsnet launched the “Let Girls Be Girls” campaign, which argued that media and consumer products (including popular music) were responsible for the “premature sexualisation of children” (Mumsnet, n.d., para. 2).

The notion of sexualisation has been much debated in the academic sphere, and scholars are divided as to whether the concept is useful, or indeed credible. Scholarly discussion of the issue has led to a broad consensus that sexualisation is a vague and ill-defined concept which reduces the complex relationship between young audiences and media texts to a simple narrative of

cause and effect. While the effects of sexualised media on children remain underexplored, there is currently insufficient evidence to support the claim that children are harmed by a process of sexualisation (at least in the way that this process is popularly understood) (Egan, 2013). Some scholars have also expressed concerns about the gendered attitudes perpetuated by this narrative. As Baumgardner and Richards (2010) note, the current discourse of sexualisation casts girls as “victims of society and, by implication, passive dupes – whether or not they themselves feel this way” (p. 185). By overlooking the mutual, participatory ways that girls interact with popular culture, this discourse invokes a passive image of girlhood which taps into the nineteenth-century construction of childhood as a period of pre-subjective innocence (Castañeda, 2002). In this way, the idea of sexualisation plays on the stereotype of the passive female fan who is unable to interpret media texts critically. In addition, some scholars have characterised the public concern surrounding sexualisation as a “moral panic” (C. Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2005, p. 1), a phrase that is generally associated with conservative, religious, right-wing ideology (McRobbie & Thornton, 1995). Consequently, scholars have moved away from the idea of sexualisation, with researchers advocating a more nuanced approach which recognises the agency of girl audiences. Numerous scholars have argued that, rather than trying to protect girls from the perceived threat of child sexualisation, policy-makers should instead adopt a girl-focused, feminist approach to the issue of girls’ media engagement, focusing on the safety and wellbeing of girls (Bragg, Russell, Buckingham, & Willett, 2011; Duschinsky, 2013; Lerum & Dworkin, 2009; Lumby & Albury, 2010).

Despite these criticisms, I have chosen to address the issue of sexualisation in my own work because of its obvious importance to my participants. From their discussions, it was clear that the girls had taken the idea of sexualisation on board wholeheartedly; they felt that sexualised media content was a very real threat, and that it had the power to change how people think and behave. Given the prevalence of this discourse within the wider culture, it is likely that the girls may have come into contact with the idea of sexualisation at some point, either through their engagement with the media or through their interactions with adults and other children, and this may explain why they were so concerned about the issue.

9.3 Negotiating patriarchal discourses

It is perhaps understandable that the girls took up this discourse so enthusiastically, given the prevalence of sexualised imagery in the media. Many researchers have argued that media products aimed at children have become increasingly sexualised in terms of their visual content,

and images of objectified women have become normalised within a hyper-sexualised media culture (Bragg & Buckingham, 2009; Buckingham et al., 2010; Kehily, 2012). There are many possible reasons for this, not least the fact that this imagery is arguably becoming more common across a wide range of different media. To understand this, it is important for scholars to recognise the mutual influence which takes place between different forms of media, and the way in which this can lead ideas, discourses and images to spread; as Walsh (2005) argues, “the commodification of female sexuality in popular culture must be considered in relation to capitalism and patriarchy in order to understand its function in the production of meaning” (p. 74). In particular, feminist scholars have argued that the increasing availability of online pornography is driving this trend, and that the visual content of popular culture has been heavily influenced by the aesthetics of commercial pornography (Caputi, 2011; Cole, 1999; Levande, 2008; Lieb, 2013). Some female performers have also spoken out about this issue. In 2013, singer Annie Lennox criticised the music videos of pop stars like Miley Cyrus and Rihanna, arguing that they were merely “highly styled pornography with musical accompaniment” (“Annie Lennox condemns ‘pornographic’ music videos,” 2013, para. 2).

The girls’ responses illustrate their understandable dismay about the representation of women in popular music. Running through their discussions was a deeply personal sense of disappointment that they could not relate to the images of women that were offered to them within popular culture. They clearly identified very strongly with female pop stars, viewing them as role models who, they felt, should be setting a good example to their young fans.

In order to express their resistance to these controversial female stars, the girls invoked a discourse of modesty, fetishizing a version of femininity that was chaste, modest and unassuming. They disliked women who were seen as sexually confident, aggressive or provocative, such as Miley Cyrus and Nicki Minaj. As explained earlier in the chapter, the language used by the girls to describe these women conjured up ideas of pollution, contamination and filth, constructing the female body as an object of shame, fear and disgust. In many ways, their negative descriptions of these performers reflect stereotypical attitudes towards female musicians, particularly singers. In almost all cultures and traditions, the female singer has historically been associated with the figure of the prostitute or temptress and, because of this, the sexual reputation of female singers is often called into question (Green, 1997, p. 29). This stereotype invokes the Madonna-whore dichotomy, positioning the female singer as the “whore” or “bad woman”, a disruptive female archetype whose sexual deviance and licentiousness present a challenge to respectable bourgeois femininity, threatening to corrupt the institution of compulsory heterosexuality.

By positioning these performers as “whores”, the girls Othered them, distancing themselves from the corrupting influence of these women. This amounts to an act of positioning; by Othering “bad women”, the girls positioned themselves as “good women” by comparison, performing an innocent version of chaste femininity. Other scholars conducting research with young female participants have also observed similar behaviours in their own participants, noting that adolescent girls typically seek to distance themselves from women who are seen as promiscuous or sexually deviant, in order to bolster their own superior moral identity (Tolman, 2002, p. 121; Weekes, 2004, p. 151).

The girls clearly saw their stance on this subject as subversive. In their eyes, they were challenging the prevailing representation of women in the media and, because of this, they felt that they were resisting the status quo. The extent of this resistance, however, is questionable. In order to challenge one dominant discourse (women as sex objects), the girls took up another dominant discourse (female modesty). Although these discourses may seem oppositional, they both represent patriarchal constructions of femininity which mirror the Madonna-whore dichotomy. Moreover, both of these discourses hinge on a fundamental belief that female sexuality is dangerous and threatening, and that it must therefore be strictly contained and managed. Rather than undermining patriarchal discourses, then, the girls inadvertently reinforced them. This demonstrates the extent to which patriarchal discourses are entrenched within the wider culture. Within this context, the girls did not have access to many alternative models of femininity, and this made it exceptionally difficult for them to enact any kind of meaningful feminist resistance.

Despite these limitations, some of the girls offered a more critical interpretation of the representation of women in the media.

Fiona: Some of the things [Nicki Minaj has] ... done, like with her image and things ... I mean, it can be appealing to some people, but it's not ...

Molly: ... I think some of the songs are inappropriate ... and for girls, and maybe boys, our age it isn't quite what we might want to hear

Fiona: ... I think she's taking girls for granted, in a way.

Bridget: What do you mean by that?

Fiona: Just like what like some of the lyrics she says and what, and how she looks and things ...

Molly: ... And the new song “Anaconda”, it's quite catchy ...

Monica: But really wrong, in the video.

- Molly: I think it's really wrong, yeah.
- Fiona: It is.
- Molly: It's just talking about how big your bum is, kinda thing, and it's just like, and it's not necessary ... what you want ... what we aspire to do or want to be
- Fiona: It sends the wrong message, I think ...
- Molly: ... Yeah.
- Fiona: She's taking, like Nicki Minaj is taking advantage of girls, and like showing girls off to be something that ... I don't know, that they don't want to be.
- Amber: Yeah, not quite ...
- Molly: I mean ... Miley Cyrus, I heard this, what she said in this magazine ... that she wants ... don't want to be this Disney girl anymore, she's gonna show people who she really is. But if that's who she really is, that isn't ... you know ... it isn't right!

The ideas expressed by the participants here go beyond the disapproval and condemnation expressed by many of the other girls. Molly and Fiona took their criticism further, considering the wider impact of sexualised media content, and the way in which it might shape the expectations placed on women in the real world. Rather than simply attacking Nicki Minaj personally, Molly and Fiona criticised her for contributing to a hostile, misogynistic climate in which girls are routinely objectified: "Nicki Minaj is taking advantage of girls, and like showing girls off to be something that ... they don't want to be."

Arguably, this critique represents a feminist challenge to the objectification of women in the music industry. The girls articulated this resistance through their expression of staunch moral values. During their discussions, they drew on an unashamedly simplistic, black-and-white moral framework, applying these principles to the ideas and images that they encountered in popular music. This strict moral framework allowed them to challenge gender norms and express their dissatisfaction about the limited models of femininity that were afforded to them.

Overall, the girls' discussions of this issue illustrate their struggle to conform to rigid standards of femininity within a culture which promotes a hypocritical and contradictory image of girlhood (Walkerdine, 1997). Within this context, girls' sexuality is viewed as threatening and dangerous (Kehily, 2004), and girls' sexual expression is strictly policed – and also often repressed – by parents, teachers, health professionals and religious leaders. Even today, following the sexual revolution, the threat of reputational damage continues to loom large. Girls

are constantly aware that any deviation from conventional heterosexual monogamy may result in them being branded a “slut”, a “prude” or a “lesbian”, labels which still carry considerable stigma within adolescent girls’ peer groups (Currie et al., 2009; K. A. Martin, 1996; Tolman, 2002). To conform to society’s expectations, girls must walk a precarious tightrope between “good” and “bad” femininity (Tolman, 2002, p. 82); as Griffin (2004) notes, “‘normal’ femininity is constituted in part through a series of contradictions, especially around tensions between ‘good girls’ and ‘bad girls’, that tend to be played out with respect to representations of femininity and sexuality” (p. 29). Today’s girls must learn to negotiate this dichotomy, performing an eroticised, submissive form of femininity without appearing too knowing, domineering or assertive (Tolman, 2002). Consequently, girls often struggle to carve out acceptable feminine identities. My participants’ responses illustrate this, showing how girls use popular music to navigate this difficult landscape, using female pop stars as a vehicle to discuss different models of femininity and sexual expression.

The very fact that my participants articulated these views challenges the idea that girls are docile victims of a hyper-sexualised culture. In this way, my work offers evidence to support the claims of scholars who have argued that girls are critical consumers of media, who are able to interrogate sexualised media images objectively (Charles, 2014, pp. 43–44; Harris, 2005, p. 209). The girls in my study were highly critical about the imagery of popular culture, and they were well aware of the gendered meanings of these images. Rather than simply accepting the objectification of women as normal or inevitable, the girls condemned it. While the extent of this critique was certainly limited, the participants were able to consider the negative effects this imagery might have on individuals, as well as on society as a whole. Despite their negative opinions on this subject, their discussions were ultimately hopeful, and they were able to imagine alternative scenarios and possibilities that were more palatable to them (for example, by suggesting different ways that Miley Cyrus could present herself). The girls’ responses indicate that they had an active engagement with popular culture and a critical awareness of issues relating to gender politics in the wider world. Perhaps most striking, however, was the refreshing sense of self-confidence and self-belief that was evident throughout the girls’ discussions of gender and sexuality; overall, they seemed proud of their strong moral principles, and they were generally unafraid to express beliefs which, they felt, challenged the status quo. By using popular music as a stimulus for discussion, the girls were able to explore complex and potentially sensitive topics safely, in ways which did not threaten their reputation or moral identity. In a sense, then, this suggests that popular music was beneficial to the girls, since it offered an avenue for the expression of challenging thoughts, feelings and ideas.

10 The Social Meaning of Musical Judgements

“It’s about looking cool”

In this chapter, I move away from the values expressed by the participants, exploring instead how they articulated these values in a social context. To begin with, I focus on the way that the girls used taste distinctions to differentiate themselves from other listeners, considering the social function of their musical judgements. I then explore how the girls negotiated musical taste within their own precarious social groups, examining the powerful social meanings that were communicated by certain types of music.

10.1 Rejecting the music of childhood

Throughout their discussions, the participants frequently sought to distance themselves from younger listeners, as demonstrated in the following extract from Leanne and Vicky’s focus group. During this discussion, the two girls mocked Leanne’s younger sister, who had recently started listening to One Direction.

Leanne: My sister’s been like going on to One Direction a bit more, she likes them.

Vicky: (Laughs)

Leanne: It’s just so funny.

Bridget: Why don’t you like them? You said you used to like them.

Vicky: It’s just, like, embarrassing.

By labelling Leanne’s sister’s tastes “funny” and “embarrassing”, Vicky and Leanne made a distinction between themselves and younger listeners, emphasising their superior musical tastes.

Some of the girls also distanced themselves from their younger selves, expressing regret and embarrassment about the music they had once liked.

When I was about nine, I liked Cher Lloyd ... (laughs) ... and then I realised, wow, this is awful, what am I doing? So I stopped listening to her. (Jenny)

I think I used to like a lot of boy bands, but I think I prefer a different type of music now ... I’ve just changed ... my taste in music is changing. (Amelia)

By doing this, they distanced themselves from childhood, claiming a more grown-up, mature identity. In particular, they seemed keen to reject musical styles aimed at younger children, such as “bubblegum pop”²⁰ and boy band music. The participants were well aware that children’s media was seen as uncool and childish by their peers, and because of this some of the girls actively distanced themselves from music, television programmes and films aimed at a pre-adolescent audience. For instance, Holly remarked that her peers saw Ariana Grande as a “kiddie” performer, probably because she had starred in two well-known children’s television programmes.

I quite like Ariana Grande, but I think maybe some people might not like her because she’s in, like, things like *Sam & Cat* and *Victorious* and they’re, like, sort of kiddie ... they’re like Nickelodeon ... it’s a bit like Disney channel really.
(Holly)

Sian, Alex and Emma expressed similar beliefs in their discussion of the *Barbie* film series.²¹ Although they enjoyed watching these films, they explained that their peers viewed them as “kiddie” films because of their association with the Barbie doll brand, which is aimed at a younger, pre-adolescent girl market.

Sian: I actually ... this is like really embarrassing, but I actually like Barbie films. But because of the music behind them ...

Alex: They’re so good!

Sian: Like the classical music ...

Alex: ... If it was humans, everyone would love it. Because it’s Barbies, no-one likes it.

Sian: Yeah.

Emma: Yeah. ‘Cause everyone’s like Barbies ...

Alex: But if it was humans, everyone’s like “this film’s awesome!” It’s just ‘cause it’s Barbies.

Sian: Same with songs though, though, isn’t it? Like ...

Alex: It’s just ‘cause they think it’s kiddie.

²⁰ The term “bubblegum pop” refers to a genre of pop music with catchy melodies and an upbeat sound, which is usually marketed at a pre-teen audience. Bubblegum pop is widely understood as a “manufactured” style, and is therefore generally seen as inauthentic (for a discussion of “manufactured” music, see p. 88).

²¹ The *Barbie* film series is a series of short animated films produced by Mattel, featuring the eponymous doll Barbie. Produced during the early 2000s, these films draw on various sources, including ballets (such as Tchaikovsky’s *Nutcracker*) and fairy tales (such as Rapunzel).

Other researchers studying young people's engagement with popular music have observed similar findings, reporting that children often distance themselves from music aimed at a younger audience. Richards (1998), for example, found that the female participants in his study (all of whom were 15 or 16 years old) rejected "teeny bop" music because they associated it with pre-adolescent and early-adolescent children. In doing so, they distinguished themselves from children who were just a few years younger, taking up "a collective self-positioning as older and more sophisticated in relation to ... the 'teeny bop scene'" (p. 105). This distinction might seem trivial, given the obvious similarities between these two groups (adolescent children and pre-adolescent children). However, as Richards argues, it is precisely because of these similarities that the adolescent girls in his study were so keen to distinguish themselves from pre-adolescents, since they clearly felt it was possible that they might be mistaken for younger girls (p. 105).

In addition, the girls in my study were keen to align themselves with the music of older listeners, and they often discussed how their musical tastes had been influenced by family members (usually older siblings and fathers).

Me and my brother ... 'cause he's twenty ... so he's sort of listened to [Arctic Monkeys] ... since they started, and then I've listened to them ... not like I do now, but I've known who they were because of him ... so they're sort of on all the time in our house. (Lauren)

My dad likes people like Green Day, so I started listening to them. (Jenny)

'Cause I've got a brother, he's twenty-one and he ... he goes down town every Saturday, and sometimes on Fridays. And he, like, he loves [dance music]. Like, he's got a car and he's always got [it] on full blast and ... he used to share a bedroom with me ... and he played music full blast ... so he got me into it as well a bit, like ... like when you go down town at night on Saturdays and that, it's like that sort of music. (Vicky)

It is interesting that Vicky explicitly linked electronic dance music with adult activities like drinking, socialising and clubbing. This reinforces the idea that this style of music is more "adult" and "grown-up" than other styles, particularly mainstream pop music. Similarly, Jenny and Lauren frequently mentioned music festivals that they had attended with their parents, such as Reading Festival and Leeds Festival. Although children are allowed to attend these festivals with adult supervision, these spaces are still very much the domain of adults and young adults, hence the requirement for children to be accompanied. By aligning themselves with adult activities, events and spaces, these participants distanced themselves even further from childhood, and from the disempowerment that they associated with it.

The following quotation summarises the girls' beliefs about age and musical taste. In it, Violet discusses the development of taste, suggesting that younger children tend to prefer current pop music (or "new" music) because they want to fit in with their peers. As people get older, she argued, they tend to branch out more, listening to different musical styles (including older music); consequently, she characterised older children's tastes as more varied and refined than younger children's tastes. It is through this gradual exploration of different musical styles, Violet suggested, that young people form a coherent sense of their tastes.

Well I think what happens is like, when you're in junior school, you're trying to ... I think you're not really mature, so you're trying to like what everyone else likes. So that's when ... I think, for me, I think that's when I tended to like new stuff. But then now, I think, when everyone gets more mature, they realize that, wait, I actually like [other things] ... you go to more discos and parties and like, and maybe that's from the 1980s and I don't really like that, or that's from 2000 but I still really like that. And you can like old songs or just new songs that are quite different ... you just find your taste in music. (Violet)

Research with children has shown that these beliefs and behaviours are typical. As Christenson and DeBenedittis (1986) note, children usually start listening to popular music well before adolescence, and they often show an interest in music that is preferred by older children, teenagers and adults. Much popular music is aimed at adolescents and young adults, and consequently it often revolves around relatively "adult" topics, such as sex, relationships, socialising and clubbing (Christenson & DeBenedittis, 1986, p. 29). By engaging with this music at such a young age, Christenson and DeBenedittis argue that young children "eavesdrop" on adolescence, "listening in on a culture to which they may desperately aspire ... but which is not yet theirs" (p. 29). Bloustien's (2003) research reinforces these findings. Rather than using music to rebel against adult authority, the adolescent girls in her study used popular music to align themselves with young adulthood, since music offered them a "pathway to enable them to link into broader *adult* cultural activities" (p. 222). Similarly, Chittenden (2013) suggests that girls use pop songs to prepare themselves for the experiences of young adulthood. Contextualising this phenomenon alongside scholarly work on memory, she argues that pop music allows girls to feel a sense of "nostalgia in reverse", remembering a youth which they have yet to experience. By listening to the music of young female pop stars like Taylor Swift, young girls can tap into an idealised notion of youthful independence which is, as yet, unavailable to them: "teens are going through all the 'firsts' (boyfriend, car, job, leaving home) ... yet without a former self to draw upon, these teens substitute their own missing past with Swift's" (Chittenden, 2013, p. 192).

For the participants, age was very significant, and it was clear that they associated childhood with disempowerment and a lack of control. This reflects the status of children within a society

structured around generational distinctions (Mayall, 2008). Within this context, children are seen as vulnerable, innocent and in need of protection and, as a result, their freedoms are curtailed by adults, in order to shield them from possible danger. It makes sense, then, that children view adulthood as aspirational; children are often acutely aware of the freedoms afforded to adults and older children, and because of this they often look forward to growing up. By claiming more “adult” musical tastes, the girls in my study were able to access more empowered identities based on ideas of independence, maturity and autonomy, as well as other highly-valued qualities that they associated with age, such as knowledge and discernment, and this allowed them (at least momentarily) to escape the relative powerlessness of childhood.

10.2 The denigration of girl audiences

Beliefs about gender also played a significant role in the girls’ discussions of musical taste, and they often described female listeners in extremely negative, derogatory terms. Many of the girls actively distanced themselves from other female listeners, and from bands and artists with a predominantly female audience. Imogen, for example, explained that the main reason she disliked One Direction was their primarily female fanbase.

[One Direction] just get so annoying, ‘cause, like, all the girls like them. (Imogen)

Jenny and Lauren expressed similar opinions during their focus group discussion.

Jenny: I think sometimes [One Direction’s] fanbase has driven me to, like, really hating them because ... seriously.

Lauren: Yeah. I don’t even hate *them* that much, it’s just the like fanbase and like ...

Jenny: Yeah, the fanbase.

Throughout this discussion, Jenny, Lauren and their friend Nora (who, in fact, admitted that she actually quite liked One Direction) mocked the group’s fans, labelling them “idiots” and describing them as “stupid” and “lazy”.

This negative characterisation mirrors existing sexist discourses about female fans which have dominated popular culture for decades (Coates, 2003). There is, however, something unique about the denigration of One Direction fans, and this particular group of fans has arguably faced a more aggressive barrage of ridicule, criticism and scorn than others. At the peak of the group’s popularity, One Direction’s female fans were roundly mocked in the press and were frequently

described in sexist terms as “hysterical” and “crazy” (“5 most insane reactions to Zayn Malik quitting One Direction,” 2015; Bagwell, 2015; Withers, 2016). The 2013 Channel 4 documentary series *Crazy About One Direction* (2013) played on these perceptions. The series, which followed a group of dedicated One Direction superfans, was criticised both by fans and members of One Direction, who objected to its scornful, overly-sensational tone (Deen, 2013).

The girls criticised female fans for a number of reasons, all of which relied on gendered assumptions about women’s engagement with culture. For example, they argued that girls were not interested in musical sound, suggesting that they were more concerned about the perceived attractiveness of male heartthrobs. Because of this assumption, they characterised other female fans as shallow and frivolous.

The only reason everyone likes [One Direction] is ‘cause all the girls like them ‘cause they think they’re good-looking. (Hayley)

I just don’t think [One Direction is] a good band ... I think it’s just the girls like them because of their image, not because of their songs. They just like them because of how they look and stuff, not about their actual songs and stuff. (Imogen)

I find [One Direction] really annoying. I don’t like them, I don’t like watching them, I don’t like listening to them ... as people grow up, they’re not like the seven-year-olds that want to marry them anymore, they actually want a different type of music to listen to. (Amelia)

As shown in these quotations, many of the participants seemed keen to distance themselves from boy bands. In doing so, they rejected the “heartthrob” culture surrounding these groups, which encourages girls to devote themselves unquestioningly to male pop stars, who are admired, elevated and sexually desired (Ehrenreich, Hess, & Jacobs, 1992). In his study of slightly older teenagers, Richards (1998) also observed that his female participants rejected heartthrob culture. He interprets this rejection as an act of subversion – an attempt to “refuse the act of (female) subjection to (male) stars commonly attributed to fans” (p. 105). By rejecting male heartthrobs, Richards argues that the girls challenged unequal power relations by refusing to participate in a culture which demands that girls submit themselves to a male star, performing a form of hero worship. In this way, my own participants’ rejection of heartthrob culture could be seen as a resistant act which challenges conventional gender roles and the “compulsory heterosexuality” (Rich, 1980) of mainstream popular culture.

However, rather than criticising the culture which produces and promotes these gender roles, the girls instead criticised female fans themselves, invoking a sexist discourse which denies that women are interested in music at all. This discourse reduces women to their romantic or sexual role, assuming that their interest in music is driven by irrational bodily desires rather than by an

intellectual engagement with aesthetic form. As explained in Chapter 4, this more detached, cerebral “appreciation” of music is seen as superior to other forms of musical engagement, while the intuitive, bodily response to music is constructed as primitive, feminine and weak. Ultimately, this discourse stems from the construction of art as an inherently masculine concept which occupies the realm of reason, rationality and intellect (Cusick, 1999; Green, 1997; McClary, 1991).

They also constructed female listeners as passive, in much the same way as they did younger listeners. This reflects the gendered construction of girlhood as a period of childish inadequacy, characterised by a lack of agency; as Driscoll (2002) suggests, the figure of the girl is viewed as incomplete, immature and inferior in comparison with the woman, the boy and, of course, the man. In this way, the female condition is conceptualised as a childlike, pre-subjective state.

10.3 The value of subcultural knowledge

Some of the girls also distanced themselves from fans of other musical styles, particularly styles of music that were seen as “mainstream”. Although they did not use terms like “mainstream” or “alternative”, they nonetheless invoked this dichotomous distinction throughout their discussions. This led them to reject music that was popular in a literal sense – in other words, music that was seen as too well-known, widely-played or accessible. Hayley, for example, stated that she disliked One Direction specifically *because* of the group’s mass appeal.

Bridget: Why don’t you like One Direction?

Hayley: Because everybody loves them!

Likewise, Amelia disliked the animated musical *Frozen* (2013) because it had become extremely popular amongst her peers.

[I like] some of [*Frozen*], and some of it I don’t like. I don’t like the fact that everyone’s obsessed with it. And then everywhere you go you hear a *Frozen* song, and it just gets on my nerves a bit ... I enjoyed the film. But I just don’t like the fact that everyone’s so obsessed with it. (Amelia)

This was especially true of Jenny and Lauren, who expressed an almost tribal allegiance to rock music. Because of this, they rejected music that was popular with their peers, defining themselves largely in opposition to fans of mainstream pop music. Instead, they preferred American pop-punk bands from the 1990s and early 2000s (such as Blink-182, Green Day, Panic! at the Disco and Fall Out Boy), indie rock bands (such as Arctic Monkeys and The

Kooks) and rock acts from the 1960s and 1970s (including David Bowie and The Kinks). They seemed to regard their musical tastes as unusual and unconventional, and they were keen to stress that most other girls did not like the same music. In general, they saw their tastes as subversive, interpreting rock music as a challenge to the mainstream. In this way, they laid claim to a subcultural identity.

No-one, like, no-one knows [Blink-182]. (Lauren)

I think [The Kinks are] really underappreciated, like ... in my class, I could talk about The Beatles, and people will be like, "oh yeah, this song, that song" and all that. And I'll talk about The Kinks and they'll be like, "never heard of them ever." (Lauren)

I don't think that many people our age listen to stuff like this. It's all, like, One Direction and, like, twerking and Miley Cyrus. (Jenny)

For Jenny and Lauren, the value of rock music lay in its perceived exclusivity and the fact that their peers did not know much about it. As demonstrated throughout this thesis, musical knowledge was considered by the girls to be extremely valuable. Jenny and Lauren felt it was important for people to have an in-depth knowledge of music, and they dismissed those who lacked this knowledge as somewhat laughable and pathetic. Throughout their discussions, they ridiculed individuals who they felt were ignorant about music (particularly rock music).

There are loads of people at our school that are like, "oh, I love the Arctic Monkeys". But then they think, they all think that *AM* is like the first album they've ever done. And then I'm like, "oh, so what's your favourite song?" and they're like, "oh, 'Arabella'" or something but then, and I'll be like, "oh, have you heard 'Crying Lightning'?" and they'll be like, "what, they've got other songs?" and I'm like, "well, yeah. They haven't just got one album! They've been around since like 2005 or something." (Lauren)

There's people who think ... that *Save Rock and Roll* is like [Fall Out Boy's] first album ... I've met people who think that and it's like, no, stop! (Jenny)

At school I'll talk about like Green Day and someone'll know like "American Idiot" or, like, maybe one of the new songs. But then I'll talk about, like, something off *Dookie* and they'll be like, "I've never heard that song." (Lauren)

Although they claimed to find this ignorance irritating, they took immense pleasure in sharing these stories, which they clearly found very amusing. By drawing attention to the perceived ignorance of others, they highlighted their own superior knowledge.

Throughout their discussions, Jenny and Lauren described fans of chart music in disparaging terms, characterising them as naïve and culturally incompetent. This is evident in the following

extract from my interview with Jenny, in which she compares her friends' musical tastes with her own.

Jenny: None of our, like, main friend group really like what [Lauren and I] like.
Erm ...

Bridget: Do they like pop music or ...

Jenny: Yeah, they just like whatever's in the charts. Or we have friends that don't listen to music.

Bridget: Really?

Jenny: Yeah. I know, I find it kinda weird!

Bridget: Oh, what do they do? Nothing?

Jenny: Erm, like, I think they just like hear stuff on the radio and things like that.

Jenny's choice of language encapsulates her negative attitudes towards "mainstream" listeners. Rather than simply acknowledging that she and her friends had different musical tastes, Jenny went further, suggesting that her friends "don't listen to music" at all. Instead, she argued that they merely "hear" whatever happens to be on the radio, rather than actively seeking out new and interesting musical styles. Her use of the word "hear", rather than "listen", is highly suggestive, implying a passive response to music. Through this use of language, Jenny characterised her friends as unsophisticated listeners with little genuine interest in music. In contrast, she positioned herself as a more "active" listener, who was more critical, discriminating and self-aware. In this way, Jenny implicitly linked the idea of subculture with a more active style of musical engagement, suggesting that fans of "alternative" styles were, by definition, more open-minded and appreciative of different kinds of music. Notably, Jenny's beliefs about mainstream listeners illustrate the central significance of *agency* for the girls; in order for the participants to see themselves as empowered musical subjects, they felt that they must have total control over their musical judgements, consciously crafting their opinions about music, using their musical knowledge as a point of reference.

Through these distinctions, the girls embodied cultural capital. According to Bourdieu (1986), cultural capital relies on the acquisition and demonstration of cultural knowledge. To embody cultural capital, it is not sufficient to simply *know* about music, one must also be able to demonstrate this knowledge in specific, socially-coded ways. The rules which govern this economy of knowledge are highly sensitive to context and vary considerably across different social groups, communities and geographical locations. By performing knowledge in certain

context-specific ways, the girls were able to accumulate cultural capital through the act of social interaction, and this enabled them to wield power within their peer groups.

This particular form of cultural capital is best understood using Thornton's (1995) concept of subcultural capital. Subcultural capital relies on the same principles as Bourdieu's (1986) cultural capital; like cultural capital, it is conferred through the accumulation and expression of cultural knowledge, which in turn designates prestige, and therefore status, within the social hierarchy. However, subcultural capital differs from cultural capital in a number of crucial ways. Most significantly, subcultural capital is rarely institutionalised and, because of this, it tends to operate largely outside the realm of the social elite. Instead, it usually functions within "less privileged domains" (Thornton, 1995, p. 26), such as youth peer groups, in which class and social status do not necessarily correlate. Subcultural capital denotes "hipness" or "coolness", rather than "quality" or "prestige", and the concept is generally more relevant to "low" (or "popular") culture than to "high" art.

Just as books and paintings display cultural capital in the family home, so subcultural capital is objectified in the form of fashionable haircuts and well-assembled record collections (full of well-chosen, limited edition "white label" twelve-inches and the like). Just as cultural capital is personified in "good" manners and urbane conversation, so subcultural capital is embodied in the form of being "in the know", using (but not over-using) current slang and looking as if you were born to perform the latest dance styles. (Thornton, 1995, p. 27)

Thornton (1995) stresses that, like cultural capital, subcultural capital relies on knowledge. In order to embody subcultural capital, individuals must be able to perform subcultural knowledge in a natural way, conveying the impression of effortless "cool"; as Thornton notes, "nothing depletes capital more than the sight of someone trying too hard" (p. 27). Within the context of their own peer groups, Jenny and Lauren embodied subcultural capital, expressing musical tastes which were viewed (certainly by them) as "cool" or "alternative". They saw their extensive knowledge of rock music as a valuable commodity, and the fact that this knowledge was relatively uncommon within their peer group made it all the more valuable. By accumulating subcultural capital, they were able to take up more powerful positions than their peers, whose musical tastes they regarded as "mainstream".

The notion of subcultural capital is itself a deeply gendered concept, and it was clear from the girls' discussions that their views on this subject were intertwined with their wider beliefs about gender. Notably, the musical styles that Jenny and Lauren regarded as "alternative" were all rock styles. Rock music is generally regarded as a particularly male-dominated genre, which often employs a hyper-masculine aesthetic (Frith, 1983; Frith & McRobbie, 1990). Throughout the history of rock music, women musicians and listeners have been actively excluded from

rock culture and, even today, female rock musicians tend to be restricted to conventionally feminine roles, such as the role of singer (Bayton, 1998; Clawson, 1999; Leonard, 2007). With the exception of Hayley Williams (the lead singer of pop punk band Paramore) all of the rock musicians mentioned by Jenny and Lauren were male and, even when asked, they were not able to think of another female performer they liked.

Indeed, the very notion of subculture is itself gendered. As Huyssen (1986) argues, mass culture is positioned as Woman (or Other) in opposition to high culture, which is understood as the masculine norm. Thornton (1995) develops this, suggesting that alternative music is coded as masculine, virile and powerful in comparison with mainstream music, which is coded as feminine, weak and passive (p. 163). The rejection of “mainstream” music by some of the participants therefore suggests an attempt to distance themselves from other female listeners, and from music that they saw as “girly” or “feminine”. Rather than asserting the value of girl listeners, they instead sought to escape the denigrated state of girlhood by claiming an identity which contradicted the stereotype of the disempowered girl.

Overall, my analysis shows that, for the participants, musical taste was a fundamentally social matter. The girls viewed their own tastes in relation to the tastes of other people, and they frequently differentiated themselves from other listeners, enacting a kind of Othering. This phenomenon can be understood using Bourdieu’s (1984) theory of distinction. The term distinction refers to the process by which individuals distinguish between cultural works, usually on aesthetic grounds. It is through these acts of distinction, Bourdieu postulates, that taste is constructed. Bourdieu grounds the subject of taste firmly within the social world, demonstrating the ways in which cultural judgements work to uphold normative social structures and hierarchies.

My own work builds on this perspective, offering new insight which takes into account twenty-first-century criticism of Bourdieu’s work on taste. In recent years, scholars have identified certain limitations of Bourdieu’s research – most notably, his failure to consider the influence of factors other than social class in the development of taste (T. Bennett et al., 2009). In many ways, this is a reflection of the geographical and historical context in which Bourdieu’s research took place; *Distinction* (1984) is based on data collected in 1960s France, and Bourdieu’s ideas about taste reflect this highly stratified, conservative society, in which social class played a more significant role than it does today in most contemporary Western countries. T. Bennett et al. (2009) expand on Bourdieu’s work, suggesting that, in today’s globalised, multicultural society, the issue of class is complicated by a range of other intersecting variables which also have a bearing on taste, including age, gender and ethnicity.

Using empirical evidence, my research demonstrates the influence of two of these factors on taste: age and gender. My participants were greatly influenced by their belief that girls and young women were unsophisticated listeners and, as a result, they sought to construct identities in opposition to the notion of stereotypical girlhood. These identities revolved around the idea of agency; by stressing the supposed shallowness, immaturity and ignorance of other listeners, they highlighted their own competence, knowledge and discernment by comparison. In this way, the girls' discussions demonstrate their keen understanding of the unspoken rules which governed standards of taste within their peer groups, showing that they knew how to perform taste appropriately within this setting.

10.4 Performing taste

In this section, I focus primarily on positioning, exploring how the participants used musical judgements to position themselves within social groups. Negotiating taste was a constant source of struggle for the girls, and this negotiation took place within an environment that was often hostile, insecure and unpredictable. The girls were well aware of the social significance of their musical judgements. They understood that it was extremely important to perform taste in socially-acceptable ways, and they described – with remarkable insight and self-awareness – how they used musical judgements to their own advantage.

As I have shown, the girls often sought to distance themselves from others, in order to reinforce their superior status as sophisticated listeners. These distinctions were not just metaphorical. The girls also sometimes enacted a far more personal, direct form of Othering, openly ridiculing girls who did not share their taste in music. For example, Fay, Verity, Amy and Georgie mocked Kelly (a girl who was not present during the focus group, and who did not take part in the research) because she liked the Billy Joel hit “Uptown Girl”, a song which they considered uncool and outdated.

Fay: I'm not bringing that one back from, like, the 1980s that Kelly likes.

Amy: What is it?

Verity: What is it?

Fay: There's one. “Uptown Girl”.

Verity: Aw, that's the worst song ever!

Georgie: Nooo!

Fay: That's what she likes!

Amy: Oh?

Georgie: She actually likes that?!

Fay: Yeah!

Some of the other participants engaged in a more gentle, tongue-in-cheek style of mockery. Jenny, for example, teased her friend Nora because she liked One Direction.

Bridget: Erm, d'you like any boy bands? Do you like One Direction or anything? ...

Jenny: ... (Gesturing to Nora) *She* does!

Nora: I just get, I just get abused!

(The girls laugh)

Jenny: We just abuse her.

Nora: And I, I'm just not allowed to talk about them.

Jenny: She's not.

The girls were very conscious that they would be exposed to ridicule, abuse and bullying (both in "real life" and online) if they were deemed to have "bad" taste in music. Because of this, they were very careful when discussing their musical tastes with others. For example, Jenny and Nora explained that they were cautious about sharing their opinions about music online, in case this laid them open to abuse or criticism.

Bridget: Do you like sharing music on social media and stuff?

Jenny: Erm ... well, it depends, 'cause sometimes you get attacked for your opinion.

Nora: Yeah. You just get abuse.

Lily described similar concerns in her interview, explaining that she was careful to conceal her musical tastes from her peers. At just 10 years old, she was one of the youngest participants, and she seemed less confident about expressing her tastes than many of the other girls. At this age, children usually have very narrow, rigid musical tastes, expressing a strong preference for just a few pop styles (Hargreaves et al., 2016, p. 313). However, unlike most girls her age, Lily did not listen to much current chart music. Instead, she mostly listened to the bands her parents liked, such as The Beatles and The Beach Boys. She was aware that her musical tastes would be deemed unacceptable by her peers, and that the music she liked would be considered

embarrassing, outdated and uncool. Having witnessed another girl being mocked for liking “old” music, Lily felt it was best to keep quiet about it, in case she was subjected to similar bullying.

But I don’t tell other people [what music I like] because ... because I’ve seen some people ... a girl who used to go to my school ... she said she used to [like old music] and people used to make fun of her ‘cause she used to listen to that kind of music ... they used to say she listens to old ... music ... I listen to that, and so I didn’t say much. (Lily)

Not only did some of the girls occasionally keep their opinions about music quiet, they also sometimes went along with other people’s opinions, in order to avoid conflict. In the following extract, Emma, Sian and Violet discuss this, explaining that they sometimes felt under pressure to like the same music as their friends, classmates and relatives.

Emma: Like my brother was listening to a song the other day and he liked it, but then he was talking to his friends and he was like, “oh, I hate that song.” I was like, “but you said you liked it”, and he was like “yeah, but I don’t like the band so I can’t like the song.”

Sian: Aw, maybe it’s like, maybe it’s like ‘cause of their friends, like if your friends don’t like it then you don’t like it ...

Emma: You kind of agree with them ...

Bridget: Do you ever feel like that yourselves?

Sian: Yeah, yeah.

Emma: Yeah, sometimes ...

Violet: (Gesturing to the other girls) Not with you! With other friends ... But yeah, like I mean, when you’re like, “oh, they’re good singers”, or “oh, I don’t like them”, and someone’s like, “yeah, they are”, or “yeah, they’re good singers, how can you not like them?”

Sian: You feel, like, pressured.

Violet: Or like you’re a hater and then ...

(Everyone laughs)

Violet: Erm, and then you’re like, “oh yeah, I do like them”, but you don’t actually.

Sian: Yeah, and then you try to find a way out of it. Like saying, “oh yeah, I like some of their music” ... I feel that way with my parents though sometimes. Like, if I don’t like a piece of classical music that my dad likes, I’ll feel a bit guilty ‘cause I don’t like it ...

Bridget: Do you pretend to like it?

Sian: Yeah.

Jenny, Nora and Lauren also discussed this topic in their focus group, expressing disapproval about people who were dishonest about their tastes. In the following excerpt from their discussion, Lauren describes how one of her (male) classmates had chosen to hide his musical tastes, in order to gain approval within certain social circles. Although the girls who took part in this focus group clearly disliked this behaviour, they nevertheless acknowledged that it was common, blaming it on the intense pressure to fit in with one's peers.

Lauren: Like, you know Jack?

Jenny: Yeah.

Lauren: He loves Blink-182 but he won't admit it to like Jason and stuff.

Nora: Yeah.

Lauren: 'Cause [Jason] doesn't like it.

Jenny: It's about looking cool ...

Lauren: Yeah.

Nora: Yeah.

Jenny: ... and things like that. 'Cause [Jack's] friends with, like, loads of chavs, so they think they're really cool ... and they all listen to, like, rapping and stuff like that.

Lauren: Yeah, there's like one boy in my class, and he's like ... like top person, sorta thing.

Nora: Yeah. Top person!

Jenny: Like head chav!

Lauren: And then there's another boy ... I was having this conversation with him about Blink-182 and he was on about how much he likes them. But then he, like, but then he wouldn't admit that to, like, the other boy ... 'cause it's not what he likes.

Jenny: Yeah. They all want to look cool to, like, the person at the top.

Bridget: Yeah. And [Blink-182] is not cool?

Jenny: Er ... not really ...

Lauren: Like, unless you like it.

Jenny: Not unless you're, like, popular. And, well, it's not that we're *not* popular. It's just ... you know.

(Everyone laughs)

Lauren: (Jokingly) *I am* popular!

Jenny: (Mocking Lauren) “*I am* popular!” Er, no, we’re not.

In this discussion, the girls link musical taste with popularity, arguing that young people feel under pressure to emulate those who are seen as “popular”. In this context, the word popular refers to a school-based hierarchy of power and status (Adler & Adler, 1998, p. 38). This hierarchy represents a complex system of social organisation, which depends on multiple factors, including sex, class, economic status, academic ability and perceived physical attractiveness. In early childhood, popularity is associated with agreeableness. However, from early adolescence onwards it becomes less associated with prosocial behaviours and more associated with deviance, dominance, aggression and manipulation (Wargo Aikins & Litwack, 2011). This “perceived popularity” (Cillessen & Rose, 2005) represents a measure of social power, rather than likeability. Adolescents who are perceived to be popular are usually “well known, socially central, and emulated” (Cillessen & Rose, 2005, p. 102); in other words, they garner the attention and admiration of peers, rather than genuine feelings of warmth or fondness. Consequently, popular adolescents are very often resented and disliked by those around them.

It is clear from their discussion that Jenny, Lauren and Nora were talking about perceived popularity. These three participants were confident, sociable young women who seemed to have a lot of friends and an active social life. It is therefore interesting that they did not consider themselves popular. Moreover, they seemed to dislike those who were seen as popular, describing them as “chavs”, a pejorative term used to describe the white, working-class poor (Hayward & Yar, 2006; Tyler, 2008). They characterised these “chavs” as arrogant, conceited and pretentious: “they think they’re really cool” (Jenny). However, despite their obvious resentment of these individuals, they nonetheless acknowledged that popularity was a desirable state, joking that they too wanted to be seen as popular; as Lauren protested, “*I am* popular!” Clearly, they understood the value of perceived popularity, and they recognised that, because musical taste was bound up with social status, individuals could position themselves as popular by expressing certain tastes.

This particular discussion offers a snapshot into the fraught social landscape that the participants inhabited. In general, their social lives seemed stressful and problematic, and their interpersonal relationships seemed to generate considerable anxiety and conflict. While their friendships were obviously immensely important to them, I also got the sense that they were extremely intense and precarious. Within their peer groups, they were expected to strike a careful balance between

conformity and individuality, maintaining a unique identity whilst simultaneously “fitting in” with group norms. This balancing act seemed to be a particular source of tension for the girls.

It is understandable that they were anxious about discussing their musical tastes openly, given that taste is considered to be deeply socially meaningful. Indeed, musical taste informs social judgements, influencing how people evaluate others. Music’s social meaning derives primarily from its ability to convey information about people (Bakagiannis & Tarrant, 2006; Tarrant et al., 2002), and musical taste is thought to reveal crucial details about social status, class, age, cultural background and values. Research into adolescent musical taste has shown that young people associate music they like with positive qualities (such as “fashionable”, “fun” and “popular”) and music they dislike with negative qualities (such as “boring”, “snobbish” and “unfriendly”) (Tarrant et al., 2001).

My research shows that musical taste played a key role in the organisation of the girls’ social groups. Since “good” musical taste was associated with power and status, the girls were able to use their musical judgements to take up more advantageous social positions. In this way, they used taste as a tool to navigate a complex cultural economy. Although much of this positioning took place on a subconscious level, it was also sometimes an active, intentional and conscious process; as I have shown, the girls often knowingly used their taste distinctions as a way to signal certain social meanings, in an attempt to manipulate group dynamics. It is, however, notable that this positioning took place *within* the existing power structures which governed the girls’ social worlds (for example, the hierarchy of popularity). As such, their positioning did little to dismantle (or even subvert) these oppressive systems.

These findings can be understood using social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social identity theory maintains that individuals derive a sense of identity (known as “social identity”) from their membership of social groups (known as ingroups), and that they value ingroup members above members of other groups (known as outgroups). An individual’s sense of social identity has a profound impact on his or her self-evaluation and self-image (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and consequently people often strive to develop a positive sense of social identity (Hargreaves et al., 2016; Hunter, Platow, Howard, & Stringer, 1996). Social identity theory conceptualises society as a hierarchy of social groups which constantly jostle for power. Groups with a strong sense of social identity are more cohesive and distinctive. As a result, they tend to be more successful, rising up the social ladder.

Social identity theory has been used by music researchers to explain how and why people make judgements about music. Research has shown that musical taste plays a significant role in the

development of adolescent social identity (Hargreaves et al., 2016; Tarrant et al., 2001, 2002, 2004). Members of social groups tend to share similar musical tastes, and individuals often use statements about music to differentiate between ingroup and outgroup members (Tarrant et al., 2001, 2002). Ingroup members typically emphasise the “bad” musical tastes of outgroup members, and this helps them to assert the distinctiveness of their own group. Group members also often police the musical tastes of other ingroup members, punishing those who deviate from group norms, a phenomenon which is known as the “black sheep effect” (Marques, Yzerbyt, & Leyens, 1988). Ultimately, this behaviour strengthens the group, since non-conformist individuals threaten group cohesiveness. As shown throughout this chapter, my participants enacted these behaviours. For example, they drew attention to the “bad” musical tastes of outgroup members (such as “chavs” and “popular” people). They also policed their friends’ tastes very strictly, punishing those who did not conform to group norms. This policing was enacted both covertly, through tacit social pressure, and overtly, through criticism and ridicule.

This supports and extends the scholarly view that adolescent children understand the social significance of musical taste (Tarrant et al., 2001), offering empirical evidence to support the theory that children use musical taste (both consciously and subconsciously) to their own advantage (Hargreaves, North, & Tarrant, 2006). The participants were clearly well aware that their musical judgements conveyed certain social meanings, and that these meanings were dependent on context. Most importantly, they understood that the issue of taste was linked with social organisation, and this knowledge allowed them to use their musical judgements as a tool to garner power and status within their peer groups. Their statements about music were often consciously crafted to create a particular impression, demonstrating an understanding of how taste works in a social setting. In this way, the girls showed themselves to be reflexive cultural actors who were keenly aware of the social implications of their musical judgements.

11 Conclusion

In this research, I set out to investigate the role of music in the construction of young female identity. As noted in the introductory chapter, there has long been an assumption that, for girls (and young people in general), popular music is linked with identity, and scholars are generally in agreement that girls use music to express a sense of identity to others. However, prior to my research, the relationship between popular music and girlhood was somewhat under-explored. In particular, there was a need for further research into the production of identity, and the role that music plays in this process; this is especially relevant to young female music audiences, since adolescent girlhood is understood as a time of identity construction, when girls are expected to forge acceptable selves in preparation for adulthood. This research is important, given that girls are highly engaged with popular music, and that popular music plays such a significant role in their social lives. Furthermore, popular music is often concerned with issues relating to girlhood, and images of girls and young women are prevalent within the culture of popular music. It is therefore vital to investigate how girls engage with the images and messages that they encounter in the media. My research examined these issues in depth, focusing specifically on how girls use musical discourse to construct identities.

To achieve this, I conducted focus groups and interviews with 10- to 13-year-old girls, exploring their beliefs and opinions about music. I then carried out a thematic analysis, examining the themes which emerged from their discussions. The girls were very interested in pop stars and popular music, and they discussed a range of different topics, including musical sound, lyrics, narrative structure, meaning, emotion, the voice and the representation of the body in popular music. Through these discussions, they expressed deeper values relating to themes such as gender, morality, power and the self. In my analysis, I explored how the girls embodied these ideas through their use of discourse, constructing identities that were based on their wider beliefs and values. Ultimately, my analysis showed that, by using discourse to position themselves, the girls were able to accumulate cultural (and subcultural) capital, which in turn could be used to gain certain forms of power.

In this concluding chapter, I summarise my findings and draw the key themes of my research together, exploring the relationships between these themes. I also consider the implications of my findings, grounding them within a wider theoretical framework. Crucially, I explore how my research contributes to broader debates surrounding popular music, girlhood and identity, offering a new approach supported by empirical evidence. In doing so, I highlight the ways in which my research extends and expands on the work of other scholars, contributing a unique

and valuable perspective which offers insight into the process of identity construction, and the close relationship between identity and power. Finally, I consider the possible limitations of my research and its real-world implications, discussing how it might be taken further in the future.

11.1 Taste, positioning and the performance of identity

This study reconsiders the issue of musical value from a popular music perspective, offering a new and innovative approach which contributes a cultural perspective to scholarly debates about identity. My research builds on the work of scholars who have explored the aesthetics of popular music, such as Frith (1996), Gracyk (1999, 2007) and Thornton (1995). By conducting a gendered analysis, my work draws on Green's (1997) ideas about gender and music, particularly her thoughts on the gendered meanings attributed to the female body and voice. I also draw on Moore's (2002) work on musical authenticity, extending his theory of first person authenticity by exploring how the concept is applied by members of a specific audience.

As explained in the introductory chapter, my work marries an aesthetic approach to the study of popular music with a more socially-situated approach. In doing so, my research demonstrates the interconnectedness of these two perspectives (the aesthetic and the social). By employing an empirical methodology, I situate the issue of musical value within a real-world social context, focusing on the application of aesthetic concepts through the act of judgement. I also focus on how these acts contribute towards the construction of a stable sense of personal taste. Although the participants clearly experienced their musical tastes as a deeply-felt, subjective response to music, their discussions show that their judgements about music were firmly grounded within the social sphere. As I have shown throughout this thesis, the issue of taste cannot be extracted from its social context. Scholars of popular music should remain mindful of this in their work, maintaining a critical awareness of the social and historical context in which music is produced and consumed. Equally, scholars studying popular music from a sociological perspective should consider how audiences interpret the aesthetics of popular music. My work shows that combining these two very different perspectives offers a nuanced approach which exposes the constructedness of musical values, whilst simultaneously recognising that, for listeners, these values remain meaningful.

At its most basic level, this study demonstrates the central significance of musical judgements for popular audiences, offering evidence to support Frith's (1996) observation that hierarchies of value exist within the category of popular music. My research takes this idea further, showing that these hierarchies also exist within specific popular styles, even those which are seen to lack

aesthetic value, such as mainstream pop music; for instance, my participants used judgements of taste to distinguish between individual pop songs and performers. Moreover, this study expands on the work of scholars who have critiqued the stereotype of the passive, unsophisticated girl fan, such as Coates (2003), Warwick (2007) and Railton and Watson (2011), providing empirical evidence to show how girls make sense of dominant cultural attitudes towards female music audiences. My research shows that girl listeners are often aware of negative stereotypes of girl fans, and that these stereotypes have an impact on their opinions about music; for example, the girls in my study used musical judgements to distance themselves from the maligned figure of the young female fan. My research shows that girl listeners are, in fact, deeply concerned with matters of musical and aesthetic value, despite the fact that they are generally assumed to lack the necessary knowledge and critical skills to make “good” musical judgements.

For my participants, music offered a way to make sense of the world around them. Crucially, popular music (and popular culture more generally) provided a wealth of stories which the girls could use to articulate ideas about how people should think, behave and interact with one another. They used popular music as a vehicle to discuss complex and highly-charged topics, such as gender, identity, morality and power. In other words, musical discourse offered them a safe space to share opinions and ideas that they might not otherwise have felt comfortable expressing. In this way, my work builds on Chittenden’s (2013) observation that girls use music to construct narratives about their lives, imagining future scenarios based on the lyrics of pop songs, and Fritzsche’s (2004) claim that popular music helps girls to cope with the pressures of adolescent girlhood. My research takes this further, suggesting that popular music has a therapeutic or supportive function for girls, helping them to explore issues which affect their lives, and to make sense of their place in the world. This is arguably particularly important for girls and young women, since they often find it difficult to articulate their concerns and anxieties about growing up in a threatening and hostile world, in which girlhood (and also womanhood) is devalued and denigrated (K. A. Martin, 1996). The girls in my study clearly struggled to negotiate the various contradictory discourses of femininity that were available to them in this context. By expressing opinions about music, they could safely explore ideas about gender without risking reputational damage.

My work also offers empirical evidence to support the widely-held view that popular music plays a role in the construction of identity, particularly for adolescents. This reinforces the findings of other scholars who have argued that girls draw on the imagery and materials of popular music to experiment with identity (Baker, 2001; Bloustien, 2003; Einerson, 1998a, 1998b; Fritzsche, 2004; Lemish, 1998; Lowe, 2004). My own research extends these findings,

offering insight into the processes involved in the production of identity. For the girls in my study, the construction of identity went beyond a simple process of signification or, as Hebdige (1979) describes it, an expression of “style”. Instead, they used musical discourse to construct identities through the act of positioning. By aligning themselves with some discourses and rejecting others, the girls took up subject positions based on their ideas and values. It was through this positioning that a coherent sense of identity emerged.

In order to explain *how* identity was produced through this process, I draw on Butler’s (1990) notion of performativity. According to Butler, gender is constructed through the habitual repetition of stylised behaviours and the constant reiteration of gendered discourses. This process is known as performativity. Drawing on this post-structuralist approach, I propose that taste is also performed, and that this contributes to the overall construction of identity. By positioning themselves through their musical judgements, the girls enacted a form of *taste performativity*. Taken alone, musical judgements represent discrete, independent acts. However, when performed habitually over the course of time, these acts “congeal” (Butler, 1990, p. 43) to create the impression of a stable, fixed identity. Like gender performativity, the performance of taste largely takes place on a subconscious level. However, my research shows that individuals are also sometimes aware of this performance, and that they use musical judgements to consciously construct identities based on their tastes.

To summarise, my research demonstrates that girls actively *use* music to construct identities, since music affords various subjectivities that they can choose to either take up or reject. In this way, the girls used musical judgements and discourses to position themselves, a process which took place both consciously and subconsciously at different times. In short, music proved useful to the girls because it offered them possibilities for self-construction. As such, my research offers a new perspective on this topic, highlighting the performativity of young female identity and the key role of positioning in girls’ identity construction.

11.2 The ideal subject

As shown throughout my analysis, the girls relied on a specific set of values when making judgements about music. Crucially, these values were shared by the girls, even across the different schools and Guide units, and they were generally in agreement about what made music “good” or “bad”. This shared set of values had currency within the girls’ social groups, offering a universal framework for the evaluation of music.

The values used by the girls throughout their discussions revolved around a series of interconnected dichotomies: high culture versus low culture, real versus fake, art versus commerce, form versus function, mind versus body. These dichotomies can be mapped on to the masculine-feminine binary, the central distinction at the heart of patriarchal ideology. In this way, the girls' dualistic beliefs about music reflected patriarchal attitudes towards gender which position femininity as essentially different from, and inferior to, masculinity.

Throughout their discussions, the girls promoted an idealised notion of late modern selfhood which revolved around moralistic ideas of self-construction, self-work and personal responsibility. In particular, they were deeply invested in the idea of agency, fetishising the figure of the autonomous, rational subject. These ideas were themselves embodied through the very act of judgement, and this was reflected in the manner in which the girls performed their tastes. By presenting their musical judgements as well-reasoned arguments, they showed themselves as rational actors who were capable of using reason and intellect to evaluate music. This idea is gendered, invoking the perceived separation between the masculine mind and the feminine body; through their judgements, the girls identified with the concept of the rational mind, rejecting the embodied (or affective) response to music. As Grosz (1994) points out, the distinction between mind and body functions as a mechanism of patriarchy, which confines women to their biological (or reproductive) role:

Relying on essentialism, naturalism and biologism, misogynist thought confines women to the biological requirements of reproduction on the assumption that because of particular biological, physiological, and endocrinological transformations, women are somehow *more* biological, *more* corporeal, and *more* natural than men. (p. 14)

These beliefs reflect wider social norms – specifically, the neoliberal concept of the autonomous, reflexive self. Today's girls must learn to manage the self effectively, adapting to the demands of a competitive economy. By emphasising highly-prized personal qualities, such as independence, autonomy and ambition, the girls in my study constructed selves which would be valued within a neoliberal society. The notion of the autonomous subject conveys considerable prestige within this context (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1986), since neoliberalism relies on the existence of a fragmented (rather than unified) workforce, composed of individuals who see themselves as unique, independent and separate. The notion of autonomy is therefore central to contemporary society, as Riger (1993) explains:

The highly valued attributes that our society defines as agentic are those associated with power and status because autonomy and mastery require the freedom to make choices. Those not in a position of autonomy and choice must focus on connection and communal goals to survive. Accordingly, whether individuals act in an

autonomous manner or operate in a communal mode reflects their relative position in the social structure. The implication is that once those lower on the hierarchy have moved up, they may move from a relatedness mode to operate on principles of autonomy and individual agency. (p. 288)

In a sense, then, the girls' responses demonstrate the profound success of the neoliberal project. From a very young age, girls are enculturated to view themselves through a neoliberal lens, valuing independence and self-reliance over co-operation, collaboration and camaraderie. This is compounded by popular culture (including popular music), much of which promotes a staunchly neoliberal world-view, advocating individualism, consumerism and market competition, as well as a general distrust of conformity and collectivism. This is probably a reflection of the participants' age, and the historical context in which they had grown up; the girls in my study represent a generation born firmly within the neoliberal age, just after the turn of the new millennium. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, the girls deployed discourses representing normative values. In other words, these discourses reproduce power relations *as they are* in society, rather than as they *could* (or *should*) be. By adopting these discourses, the girls took up powerful subject positions which allowed them to gain power, influence and status within their peer groups.

Arguably, this could be interpreted as a resistant act which challenges the stereotypical image of the passive girl fan who is unable to judge or appreciate music. Throughout the research, the girls discussed music in ways which subverted this stereotype, emphasising their ability to reason, argue, evaluate and persuade, skills which are generally not attributed to young female listeners. By doing this, they positioned themselves as sophisticated, discerning listeners, a powerful position which is not normally available to adolescent girls.

In this way, musical discourse offered the girls an opportunity to construct themselves as autonomous, rational subjects, thus fulfilling the principal goal of adolescence: the development of adult subjectivity (Driscoll, 2002). Indeed, the concept of subjectivity is itself closely bound up with the idea of reason, and it is generally assumed that, in order to make rational judgements, individuals must have agency (Currie et al., 2009, p. 202; Walkerdine et al., 2001, p. 2). Musical discourse therefore provides girls with a chance to practice being subjective, offering a safe arena to try out identities. As such, my work contributes a new perspective on identity, showing that discourses relating to pop culture play a key role in the construction of adolescent identity, particularly for girls. Furthermore, my work offers empirical evidence to support the Foucauldian approach to identity, reinforcing the thesis that identity is constructed through the negotiation of unequal power relations (McHoul & Grace, 1993). The girls understood their sense of identity primarily in terms of their relation to others (both real and

imagined), and in terms of their perceived position within various social hierarchies. In essence, then, my research shows identity to be a relational construct which derives meaning in a social context, thus countering the neoliberal model and the idea that identity is forged solely by individuals.

11.3 Interrogating empowerment

As I have shown, the girls used musical discourse to access certain forms of social power. It might therefore be tempting to conclude that they were “empowered” by popular music. However, before making such a claim, it is necessary to problematise the concept of empowerment, considering the specific type of power that the girls gained through their engagement with musical discourse, and the extent of this power. Were the girls truly empowered by their musical judgements and, if so, what did this mean in practice? Were their experiences of empowerment merely superficial, or did they represent the accumulation of a tangible form of power which might afford the possibility of change and transformation?

Ultimately, the girls’ musical judgements offered them access to a limited form of power. This took place on a micro level, operating within the existing confines of the girls’ peer groups. Their discourse was constrained within highly restrictive parameters and, as a result, their beliefs presented little challenge to the status quo. Consequently, they inadvertently reproduced and perpetuated the very discourses which work to disempower girls and limit their opportunities. Rather than trying to empower girls as a group, the participants instead sought to escape girlhood altogether; indeed, the only way that they seemed able to access any form of social power was to distance themselves as much as possible from young femininity, and everything associated with it. In short, they were only able to achieve empowerment by renouncing girlhood and girliness. As such, they sought an individualised form of empowerment, which did not trouble existing power structures. Consequently, their efforts to gain power cannot be viewed as radical or transformative, since they did not offer the potential for collective empowerment.

To make sense of these findings, I refer to scholarly debates surrounding empowerment. During the 1980s and 1990s, scholars situated empowerment firmly within a social context (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; Rappaport, 1987). In order to achieve empowerment, it was assumed that individuals must critically engage with the political systems and social networks surrounding them, interacting productively with the external environment. In his 1987 study of empowerment, Rappaport argued that empowerment could only be realised through an

awareness of the ways in which ideologies, communities, institutions and policies influence the lives of individuals. Scholars at this time understood empowerment as a radical concept, which aimed to improve the lives of individuals by overhauling oppressive social structures through direct political action (Bay-Cheng, 2012).

Since the 1980s, the concept of empowerment has entered the mainstream, and the idea of empowerment is now central to political, legal, corporate and professional discourse (Bay-Cheng, 2012, p. 714). In particular, it has become heavily associated with the women's movement; in the popular media, feminism has been redefined as a broad movement for "female empowerment" rather than equality of the sexes (Gonick, 2006; Gonick et al., 2009; Taft, 2004).

Scholars note that, since entering mainstream consciousness, the concept of empowerment has been stripped of its radical potential (Gutiérrez, DeLois, & GlenMaye, 1995; Pease, 2002; Riger, 1993). Nowadays, empowerment is dislocated from the social world and from the various networks, communities and political movements which offer individuals access to forms of collective power. Instead, it has come to refer to an individualised sense of power, defined by vague feelings of self-belief and self-confidence. The potential for empowerment is assumed to lie *within* the individual – in order to realise this empowerment, individuals must simply look inside themselves (Gutiérrez et al., 1995). As Bay-Cheng (2012) argues, "the intrapersonal component of the theory (i.e., an individual's sense of empowerment) has eclipsed its collective and action-oriented counterparts, thus depoliticizing and eroding its promise as a pathway to social justice" (p. 714).

It is no coincidence that this shift in thinking has occurred at a time of seismic social change, following the emergence of neoliberalism as a meaningful political force. Neoliberal reason dictates that individuals should constantly strive to climb the social ladder, taking responsibility for every aspect of their lives. Within this context, empowerment has been reconceptualised as a personal endeavour that is achieved independently by individuals, similar to the process of self-improvement described in Chapter 5. As such, the notion of individualised empowerment is very much a normative concept, which reproduces, rather than challenges, dominant social and cultural values; as Riger (1993) states, the idea of individualised empowerment "very much accords with our dominant political philosophy" (p. 290).

Some feminist scholars have expressed doubts about the efficacy of this strategy, questioning whether this discourse of individualised empowerment benefits girls in a meaningful way. Several studies have shown that, although girls are often taught to view themselves as empowered individuals, they still struggle to take up powerful subject positions. For example, in

her study of young women's sexual wellbeing, Bay-Cheng (2012) found that her participants were unable to assert themselves in their (heterosexual) romantic relationships, which tended to be unequal and coercive. To explain this, Bay-Cheng argues that girls cannot be empowered if they are alienated from wider systems of support: "empowerment is not forged in solitude; the feelings of personal confidence and competence that undergird self-efficacy are fuelled by the support and solidarity gleaned in relationships with others" (p. 714). Tolman's (2002) research into teenage girls' sexual development echoes Bay-Cheng's findings. Like Bay-Cheng, Tolman found that her participants struggled to articulate their thoughts, feelings and desires in relationships. In their study of girlhood and identity, Currie et al. (2009) found that the idea of individualised empowerment did not offer their young participants the tools to challenge the sexism and harassment that they encountered in their everyday lives. Although they had been taught to view themselves as empowered neoliberal subjects, they were unable to utilise this discourse of empowerment. Instead, they invoked a "depoliticised version of girl power" which "enabled them to think about alternative and resistant girlhoods" (Currie et al., 2009, p. 183) without challenging the structures which work to constrain the choices and freedoms of women and girls. These studies suggest that the idea of individualised empowerment offers girls an illusory sense of power which cannot necessarily be used to challenge patriarchal social structures. Ultimately then, this discourse serves to mask the very real structural inequalities which leave girls disempowered and disadvantaged.

My work offers new and original insight into these issues, contributing a cultural perspective to debates surrounding girlhood and empowerment. My participants were deeply invested in the notion of individualised empowerment; musical discourse offered them the promise of personal empowerment and, as I have shown, some of the girls were able to gain a limited form of power by making musical judgements. There was, however, a stark contrast between the participants' actual experiences of empowerment and the idealised version of empowerment that they promoted in their discussions. Notably, they were only able to take up subject positions within existing power structures, and they did this using the frameworks of value that were available to them within this context. Consequently, popular music did not seem to offer them access to radical subjectivities, nor did it afford the possibility of meaningful social action or collective resistance, beyond the context of their own peer groups. Instead, the girls practised a form of "coping" (Gutiérrez, 1994), developing strategies to accommodate the surrounding environment, rather than trying to change this environment to suit their needs. The girls' discussions reflect the depoliticization and individualisation of empowerment, demonstrating the neoliberal "girl power" phenomenon in action: girls buying into dominant patriarchal discourses in order to gain power on an individual basis.

Ultimately, then, the notion of individualised empowerment actually served to *disempower* the girls, since it dislocated them from wider society. As Pease (2002) notes, this version of empowerment identifies the individual, rather than society, as the “problem” to be fixed. Since the late twentieth century, empowerment has been used in the service of various political agendas, often to mask the exploitation of individuals by governments and corporate industries (Forrest, 2000; Pease, 2002). Riger (1993) argues that, by individualising social problems, this discourse of empowerment upholds the status quo, offering “the illusion of power without affecting the actual distribution of power” (p. 282). Research has shown that, although individuals often *feel* empowered, this rarely indicates a redistribution of power or resources in the real world (Riger, 1993). This highlights the central problem with the concept of individualised empowerment: that *feelings* of power do not necessarily amount to *actual* power.

The individual's experience of power or powerlessness may be unrelated to actual ability to influence, and an increase in the sense of empowerment does not always reflect an increase in actual power. Indeed, a sense of empowerment may be an illusion when so much of life is controlled by the politics and practices at a macro level. This does not mean that individuals can have no influence or that individuals' perceptions are unimportant, but rather that to reduce power to individual psychology ignores the political and historical context in which people operate. Confusing one's actual *ability* to control resources with a *sense of* empowerment depoliticizes the latter. (Riger, 1993, p. 282)

Used in this way, empowerment can be a dangerous construct, since it presents a distorted view of power relations in society, concealing inequalities and injustices in order to maintain a state of social, political and economic equilibrium. By exposing some of the problems with the notion of empowerment, my work demonstrates the limitations of the concept. It is important that these limitations are kept in mind in future research into girls and girlhood.

11.4 Negotiating discourse: Resistance and repression

In theory, there is no reason why individual girls should not be able to act upon the world without the concept of collectivism. However, my research demonstrates just how hard it is for them to do this within a highly constrained discursive context. The girls in my study struggled to take up alternative or transgressive subject positions and, on the rare occasions that they did express opinions which challenged the status quo, they tended to do this by taking up other dominant discourses. This demonstrates the rigid discursive constraints that are imposed on girls; because people tend to take up discourses which are readily available to them within their particular cultural context, it can be very difficult for individuals to articulate views which challenge established norms and conventions.

These findings need not necessarily be read as pessimistic. As I have shown throughout this thesis, the girls were, in many ways, very sophisticated listeners. Far from being passive dupes, they proved to be media-savvy consumers, who were keenly aware of the constructedness of pop cultural images. To evaluate music, they employed their knowledge and critical skills, actively rejecting media texts that they found problematic or objectionable. While their use of discourse was certainly limited, it nevertheless offered the possibility of agency, exploration and experimentation. In this way, the girls' discourse can be viewed as a constant power struggle, through which they experienced moments of both limitation and potential. As Foucault (1978) argues in *The History of Sexuality*, discourse can be used to both repress *and* resist. Indeed, it is through discourse that resistance becomes possible.

We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines it and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. (Foucault, 1978, p. 101)

By acknowledging the discursive constraints placed on individuals, my work presents a challenge to the “optimistic” (Strangelove, 2010, p. 159) approach to audience research, which presents the listener (or consumer) as the sole author of cultural knowledge. This approach is best exemplified by the work of Fiske (2010, 2011), which counters the supposedly “pessimistic” approach of the Frankfurt School theorists by arguing that audiences are fragmented (rather than cohesive) groups made up of distinct individuals who interpret popular culture subjectively. My work problematises this approach, acknowledging that, while individuals are capable of some forms of resistance, their ability to enact this resistance is often extremely limited. In doing so, I return to a more structurally-informed approach, examining the influence of broad systems and ideologies. My use of post-structuralist discourse theory tempers this structural approach; unlike Marxist theory, which assumes that groups of people (or classes) are oppressed via top-down ideological forces, Foucauldian discourse theory recognises the complexities of societal power relations, which are diffuse and intersecting, rather than simply hierarchical. Combining these theoretical approaches proved useful, since both offer a valuable insight into the relationship between audiences and texts. In a sense then, labels like “optimistic” and “pessimistic” are somewhat unhelpful, since they create a hierarchical distinction between two different ideological (and methodological) perspectives. Rather than dismissing any approach entirely, it is worth considering the ways that different theoretical perspectives may be combined, in order to develop a more holistic approach which addresses how social structures impact on individuals, and how individuals act on their external environment.

Moreover, by focusing on the structural constraints which govern girls' lives, my work offers a girl-focused, feminist perspective on girls' engagement with popular culture which considers the impact of patriarchal social structures on individual girls. There is an urgent need to understand how these oppressive structures operate, exploring how girls themselves internalise and perpetuate patriarchal discourses in their everyday lives. Despite focusing on broad discursive systems, my research does not overlook girls' capacity for agency, nor does it construct girls as a homogenous group or "class". Rather, it simply acknowledges the limitations placed on girls, situating them within a wider discursive context. It is vital for researchers to consider how the responses of their research participants reflect and reproduce the unequal, and often gendered, distribution of power within society. My own work does this, offering new evidence to show that girls use musical discourse to navigate a problematic, and often oppressive, social context. Furthermore, it suggests that, by doing this, they inadvertently reinforce normative power relations within that context, thus strengthening the very systems which serve to disempower them.

11.5 Strategies to support girls

So far in this chapter, I have situated my research within a scholarly context, considering how my findings contribute to wider academic debates about girlhood and popular music. Given that my research deals with girls' everyday experiences and concerns, it is also worth exploring the real-world implications of my work. In this section, I discuss how my work might be used to improve girls' lives in the long term, proposing strategies to support girls, both on an individual and a broader societal basis.

Perhaps most significantly, my research shows that girls have a complex, and often ambivalent, relationship with popular music (and popular culture more generally), and that they sometimes struggle to interpret meaning in popular music texts. Furthermore, it shows that they are often troubled by the imagery of popular music, and that this can sometimes cause them feelings of confusion and alienation.

To counter this, girls would benefit from a more comprehensive form of music education, particularly one which incorporates the academic study of popular music alongside the study of other musical styles. Historically, music education has concentrated on the classical canon, since it has long been assumed that children benefit from an engagement with the work of "great" composers (Woodford, 2015). Woodford (2015) notes that this approach continues to influence how children are educated about music, and consequently children are still taught to

evaluate music according to the Romantic ideals of the German aesthetic movement. There was some evidence that the girls who took part in my study had been taught to view music in this way; for example, they frequently invoked discourses of musical autonomy, attentive listening and first person authenticity throughout their discussions (as explained throughout my analysis, these discourses embody a Romantic ideal).

In recent decades, popular music has been introduced into the school curriculum at both primary and secondary levels (G. D. Smith, Moir, Brennan, Rambarran, & Kirkman, 2017). However, this development has not been without controversy and, as a result, teachers have been forced to compromise about the extent to which they include popular music in their teaching (Green, 2002, p. 156). Consequently, the teaching of popular music is sometimes limited, and popular music tends to be superficially included, rather than fully incorporated, into the curriculum. In the UK, classical music continues to dominate within research-led higher education institutions (Till, 2017), and this means that many school music teachers are classically-trained. Because of this, music education continues, to an extent, to be structured around traditional “classical” values.

In order to improve popular music education, teachers and educators must do more than simply include popular music in their teaching practice. Instead, they should also consider how children are taught to interpret meaning and value in music according to various norms and conventions. Taking my findings into account, I advocate a nuanced, context-sensitive approach to music education, which recognises that music is understood in different ways within different cultures, traditions and genres. This approach would need to take into account the fact that musical meaning is fluid and context-dependent, rather than fixed and inherent. This would help introduce children to the concept of subjectivity, encouraging them to consider the different ways that people experience music.

It is also vital that children are educated about the mass media more generally, so that they can learn to understand, decode and challenge media messages. Media education should therefore focus on critical thinking skills, encouraging children to question and interrogate the images and ideas that are presented to them by the media. Crucially, children should also be taught about how the media industries work, and how media products are created and marketed. This would help children to understand the context in which these texts are produced, distributed and consumed. Ultimately, this form of media education would ensure that children are better equipped to make sense of media texts, helping them to become informed and critical media consumers.

As well as exploring girls' engagement with popular music, my work draws attention to issues which affect girls' lives, such as bullying, interpersonal conflict, sexism, harassment and body image anxieties. My findings suggest that many girls lack the necessary skills and confidence to deal with these difficulties; my participants generally discussed these problems as though they were natural or inevitable, articulating a sense of powerlessness. It is therefore important for researchers, educators and policy-makers to develop coherent and practical strategies to support girls.

One way to do this would be to implement a well-structured, multi-pronged educational response to the issues that girls face in their daily lives. Crucially, this strategy would need to go beyond simplistic notions of "girl power", "female empowerment" and "being yourself". As explained earlier in this chapter, girls are enculturated to view themselves as empowered neoliberal subjects, and this is compounded by a powerful discourse of individualised empowerment which dominates the contemporary cultural landscape. Currie et al. (2009) note that, because of this discourse, individualistic slogans such as "be yourself" have become central to personal empowerment and assertiveness training programmes aimed at girls (pp. 200–201). It was clear from my participants' responses that they had been exposed to these individualistic ideas. Although these ideas have some value, they did little to actually empower the girls in my study, and did not offer them an effective strategy to overcome the various complex and intersecting problems that affected their lives.

Instead, girls would benefit from a more nuanced, socially-conscious form of personal, social and political education. Ideally, such an approach would situate girls' problems within a broader social context, promoting an awareness of gender inequality and the unequal power structures which operate in society. Popular music texts (such as pop songs, music videos and promotional images of pop stars) would provide a useful stimulus in this context, and could be used to prompt discussion on a range of different topics, not least those relating to gender roles, sexism and inequality. Rather than focusing on personal responsibility, this strategy would instead focus primarily on groups, networks and structures, stressing the value of collective movements, communities, families and friendship groups. To put this perspective into context, girls would also need to be educated about women's history, including the history of the women's movement. By promoting self-reflection, critical skills, active citizenship and political awareness, such an approach would equip girls with strategies to recognise and challenge injustice and inequality in their everyday lives. Moreover, this form of education would also promote a positive, productive sense of togetherness, and this might help girls to feel less alone and isolated. In a sense, then, this approach would represent a specifically *feminist* response to issues which affect girls in contemporary society.

Ultimately, though, my findings suggest that measures to improve girls' lives must go beyond educational programmes and other strategies which teach girls to assert their rights, even when these strategies apply a more collective or holistic approach. Indeed, as I have explained throughout this chapter, responsibility for these problems lies with society as a whole, rather than with individual girls. Major structural change would arguably be needed to address many of the problems which girls face; as I have shown throughout this thesis, these problems are deeply socially-ingrained, reflecting broad ideological systems which operate within society (such as the system of patriarchy). In order to give girls more power and control over their lives, significant changes would therefore need to be made to wider social, political and economic structures, and this reform would need to be on a grand scale. The task of implementing such changes would doubtless prove challenging within a highly restrictive patriarchal environment, and it is vital that feminists and other advocates for girls develop strategies to achieve this. Amongst other ideas, such strategies must involve campaigning for women's and girls' rights, and for greater (and more diverse) female representation in all areas of public life, including popular culture and the wider media.

11.6 Critically evaluating the study

As with any study, it is important to consider the possible limitations of my research. Perhaps most significantly, it is worth noting that my study was relatively small in scale (involving 53 participants). This, however, need not be viewed as a drawback. Qualitative studies generally rely on relatively small samples, focusing on depth and nuance rather than on broad trends, and qualitative research is usually not intended to be representative (see p. 35). As such, the results of qualitative studies generally cannot be assumed to represent universal or generalisable truths. As explained in my methodology chapter, I took steps to ensure that my population sample was as broad and diverse as possible, and that I had collected enough data to draw well-reasoned, well-evidenced conclusions; indeed, the purpose of my research was not to generate findings that were "representative" in a strict sense, but to explore the beliefs, values and experiences of a specific group of individuals. Because of this, it was appropriate to conduct an in-depth study, using a small, yet varied, sample. This helped ensure that I had included a range of perspectives in my work, which allowed me to account for the diversity of girls' experiences within a contemporary multicultural society. By offering a detailed breakdown of my diverse population sample (see pp. 35–37), I provided additional supplementary information about my participants, so that their responses could be better understood. In doing so, I was able to ensure that my research was firmly situated within a relevant context.

The fact that my study relies on the self-reported accounts of participants could also be viewed as a limitation, since there is no way to guarantee that people are telling the truth in interviews and focus groups. It is also notable that the girls were, at times, reflecting retrospectively on their experiences of engaging with music, and as a result their discussions were partially based on recollection. Given that memory is sometimes unreliable, it is not possible to know whether their recollections were accurate. It is, however, worth noting that the purpose of my research was to examine discourse, rather than to capture a perceived objective “truth”. As such, the supposed “accuracy” of the girls’ responses was not necessarily important to my research. It is therefore worth interrogating the very notion of “truthfulness” and questioning whether it is relevant, or indeed useful, in this context.

It is nonetheless important to acknowledge, in the interests of critical evaluation, that there were a number of factors at play during the research process which may have influenced the girls’ responses. For instance, during the focus groups, the girls may have been influenced by the presence of the other participants, and this might have caused them to censor themselves. This is particularly relevant to research involving participants who already know one another, since people are often reluctant to share their opinions with people they know personally. There was some evidence of this in my research: a few of the girls admitted in their one-to-one interviews that they were somewhat reticent about expressing their beliefs in front of their peers, for fear that they might be ridiculed for being uncool, or for saying the wrong thing. To an extent, I was able to mitigate this by using two different (but complementary) methods of data collection. The interviews offered the quieter girls an opportunity to open up without having to worry about the judgement of their peers, and many of the girls seemed more comfortable expressing themselves in this setting. Indeed, the very fact that some of the girls felt able to express these reservations in a one-to-one scenario suggests that they felt relatively at ease in this context. Moreover, since the purpose of my research was not simply to establish what kind of music the girls liked, the fact that some of them *did* choose to censor themselves had little bearing on my findings, and this was itself a point of considerable interest, as explained in my analysis. On the whole though, there was little evidence that the girls were “untruthful” in their discussions. In general, they were enthusiastic about taking part in the project, expressing their opinions freely and openly throughout the research process.

Equally, the participants may have been influenced (either consciously or subconsciously) by my presence. As explained in the methodology chapter, I tried hard to minimise the power difference between me and my participants. However, despite this, it is highly likely that the girls viewed me as an authority figure; as an adult woman, introduced to them as a researcher from a university, the difference in status was marked. There may also have been other factors

which set me apart from my participants, and which may have influenced their perceptions of me, making them less likely to share their thoughts and feelings openly. Because focus groups and interviews are social encounters, they are influenced by a range of intersecting factors, including (but not limited to) ethnicity, age, class, religion and cultural background. While it is necessary to acknowledge the impact that these factors may have had on the participants' responses, it is important to note that this is largely unavoidable; to an extent, the researcher is always an outsider within any research setting and, because of this, power dynamics in focus groups and interviews are, by nature, unequal. Ultimately, it is impossible to know exactly how my participants saw me, or how they interpreted my appearance and demeanour, since people's judgements about others are inherently subjective.

It is also possible that the participants may have had certain preconceptions about the research, and that this may have influenced the way in which they approached the focus groups and interviews. At both the schools and the Guide units, the research was introduced to the girls as a music project, and I was introduced as a music researcher. At the schools, the research activities were organised with the help of the school music teachers, and they took place during music lessons. At Trinity High School, they were conducted in the music department, in a room adjoining one of the music classrooms. Because of this, it is possible that the girls may have associated the activities with the academic study of music, adopting a stance appropriate to school music lessons. There was, however, little evidence of this. The tone of the participants' discussions at both the Guide groups and the schools was very similar, and they did not seem to adopt a particularly "academic" style of discourse. This suggests that they did not regard the focus groups and interviews as chores or schoolwork. Instead, their discussions were fairly relaxed, upbeat and light-hearted, and they seemed to enjoy sharing their opinions about music.

It is also important to evaluate the effectiveness of my analytical methods, considering how my research might have been shaped by my use of a thematic analysis. Atkinson (2015), in particular, has been highly critical of thematic approaches to qualitative analysis, arguing that such methods (particularly when carried out using data management software) can lead to a disjointed theme-led approach, which takes qualitative data at face value without considering its social or theoretical context. It is vital to consider this critique in relation to my own work, since (as stated in my methodology) I deliberately positioned my participants' voices at the forefront of my research, letting the data guide my analysis. In order to address this, I maintained a critical approach throughout my analysis, bearing in mind the social context in which the data was produced: focus groups and interviews (see pp. 44–45 for a more in-depth discussion of this critical approach). This helped me to read the data as the product of a specific social encounter, rather than as an "accurate" representation of everyday practice in the "real world", or as a form

of objective “truth”. Instead, I was careful to interpret the girls’ discourse as a socially-produced, context-specific representation of their reality, a series of stories, ideas and reflections which they used to communicate their feelings and experiences.

As such, my work addresses the complex tension between discourse and practice, recognising that discourse is not merely a straightforward representation of practice. Furthermore, I was careful to ensure that, although led by my data, my analysis was thoroughly grounded within a relevant theoretical context. Throughout this thesis, I have shown how my work links with research in a range of different disciplines, and how it contributes a new perspective on the various themes and concepts that emerged during my analysis. In this way, my work does not simply offer what Atkinson (2015) refers to as “a knitting-together of coded themes” (p. 62). Rather, it tells a coherent, consistent story about my data, which sheds new light on girls’ understanding of and engagement with popular music.

11.7 Recommendations for further research

In this thesis I have shown, using a discourse analysis of qualitative data, that girls use musical judgements and opinions about music to take up subject positions, and that this process of positioning contributes towards the construction of a stable sense of identity. In this section, I explore how this research could be taken further, identifying the most pressing issues that arose from my analysis. I also consider alternative methodological approaches which could be used to explore these issues from different perspectives.

As I have shown, my research offers an exploration of how girls discuss music, and how they use discourse to express opinions about music. However, to gain a different perspective on this particular population group, other methods could be employed. For instance, a more responsive study, using popular music texts (such as songs, music videos, album art and images of pop stars) as a stimulus for discussion, would yield different kinds of responses from participants. Ideally, this method would capture more immediate responses, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the real-time processes involved in the interpretation of popular music. This method is also direct and focused, since it involves asking participants to respond to specific texts. Such an approach would offer an opportunity to investigate how girls engage with the visual content of popular music, since it would make it possible to show participants images *without* music; as explained in Chapter 3, it was difficult for me to make this distinction in my own research because my participants tended to view popular music as an audiovisual medium (see pp. 52–54).

One of the key themes of my research was the idea of change, transition and development. This was particularly relevant to my research, given its focus on adolescence, which is understood as a transitional phase. To investigate this theme from a different angle, longitudinal research could be carried out to explore how girls' attitudes towards music change over time, as they develop and grow up. This could be achieved by conducting a diary-based study, in which participants would be asked to document their opinions about music and their listening and viewing habits, as well as their discussions about music with family and friends. Such an approach would offer a valuable biographical perspective. In addition to written diaries, participants could also be asked to create photo or video diaries, using different media to record their thoughts, feelings and experiences. Spoken data could also be gathered to support data collected using diaries, and this could be achieved by conducting successive interviews with participants at regular intervals.

Another way to gain a longitudinal perspective would be to conduct a more immersive study, using ethnographic methods. Ethnographic methods require the researcher to become involved with a group of participants over an extended period of time, building meaningful, trusting relationships with them, in order to gain an insight into their lives. By doing this, researchers can create a more naturalistic environment and, in some circumstances, this can encourage participants to express themselves more openly and honestly. For example, researchers could study girls in a school or extra-curricular environment, observing how they behave and interact, and how they discuss music in groups.

It is worth noting, however, that these immersive research methods have a number of practical disadvantages. Perhaps most significantly, long-term ethnographic methods require a great deal of time on the part of researchers, participants and gatekeepers. This can prove problematic when doing research in schools, since teachers are often reticent to devote lesson time to activities outside the school curriculum. It is also notable that, because these methods are so time-consuming, researchers who use them are often only able to incorporate the views of a very limited number of participants. There are, however, many benefits to using long-term, immersive research methods, and they can be extremely productive when used appropriately in a suitable context.

It is important to note that approaches to this area of research need not necessarily be limited to traditional methods. Instead, researchers should consider using creative, non-traditional data-collection methods, particularly when working with young participants. For instance, participants could be asked to produce their own creative artworks reflecting on their engagement with music, and this could include paintings, drawings, poems, stories, films or

theatrical performances. This creative, participatory approach would offer a personal, subjective take on the issue, focusing in on the thoughts and feelings of individual participants. Furthermore, it would allow the participants to express themselves, and to go beyond the boundaries of spoken discourse, generating alternative forms of data. These methods of data collection all have their own unique strengths. Activities such as drawing and painting would generate visual data, whereas creative writing activities would offer participants a chance to use linguistic discourse in more imaginative ways. By observing filmed or live dramatic performances by participants, researchers would also be able to capture physical or bodily forms of data, such as body language, gesture and movement.

The growth of the internet has led to new opportunities for researchers, offering an ever-increasing supply of online data generated by internet-users from around the world. This means that scholars can now conduct research into audiences without carrying out primary research with participants. Online research methods could therefore be used to study girl audiences. One way to do this would be to study publicly-available user-generated content posted on social media sites, fan sites and media platforms such as YouTube. This would potentially allow for a broader, more diverse population sample, since online methods enable researchers to capture large amounts of data more easily. It is worth noting, however, that online research presents certain problems and dilemmas. For example, it is not always possible to find out exactly who has posted data online, and it is therefore difficult to gain information on the demographic breakdown of population samples. These problems would need to be considered before undertaking work in this area, in order to assess the potential usefulness of this research.

Another way to take this study further would be to conduct research into different audiences, exploring how they engage with music and how they use musical judgements in their social lives. This would provide an interesting counterpoint to my own study, showing whether other audiences value music in the same way as did the girls in my study, and whether they also use music as a resource for identity construction.

Age was a particularly notable factor in my research. My participants' musical judgements were influenced by ideas about age, and they were driven by a desire to distance themselves from the perceived disempowerment of childhood, and from the stereotype of the young female fan. By conducting research with older participants (such as older teenage girls and young women), it would be possible to explore whether they too are motivated by similar beliefs about age and maturity, and whether they also use musical judgements as a means to construct an idealised version of adult subjectivity. Such research would also offer an interesting comparison with my

own research into younger audiences, and would potentially make it possible to explore whether people's attitudes towards music change drastically over time.

Given that gender was such a significant theme in my own research, it would be worth investigating how male audiences engage with music, and how they use discourse to express their opinions about music. To do this, a similar qualitative study could be carried out with boys of the same age. This would allow researchers to explore whether boys also use music to build identities, offering insight into the gendered nature of identity construction. It would, for example, be useful to explore whether boys also use musical discourse to take up positions of relative power, and whether they too strive to enact and embody an individualistic version of empowerment. By doing this, researchers would be able to compare how girls and boys respond to neoliberal discourses of individualised empowerment, exploring the extent to which girls, in particular, are subject to a specifically "feminine" discourse of empowerment (typically branded as "girl power").

In addition, further research could be carried out with audiences of other musical genres. Beliefs about genre played a key role in my participants' musical judgements, and these beliefs were bound up with ideas about authenticity, musical value and the perceived separation between high and low culture. Given that my own research focuses primarily on mainstream pop music, a supposedly "low" musical style, it would be interesting to study fans of other styles, particularly those which are seen as forms of "high" culture (such as jazz or classical music). This research would offer a different perspective on many of the themes that are discussed in my own work, such as cultural capital, subcultural capital, musical authenticity and aesthetic value. Furthermore, this research would extend my own findings by showing how other audiences use musical judgements to accumulate cultural capital in a social context.

11.8 Final reflections

To conclude, my research offers an in-depth analysis of the beliefs and opinions of a specific musical audience, contributing a new perspective based on qualitative, participant-based research. By shifting the focus from the object (the music) to the subject (the listener), my work draws on girls' first-hand experiences, placing their voices at the heart of my analysis. By combining empirical methods with post-structuralist discourse theory, I propose a methodology for the study of listeners' musical tastes and values. Using these methods, I show how a specific group of individuals used discourses of value to interpret musical meaning and make

judgements about music, offering insight into the social function of these judgements and the benefits they offer to girls.

At the most basic level, my findings demonstrate the central significance of music in girls' lives, offering empirical evidence to support the widely-held belief that young people use popular music as a tool to construct identities. As I have shown, girls use musical judgements to forge a sense of personal (or subjective) identity and social identity (an individual's sense of his or her position within social groups and hierarchies). My research blurs the boundary between these two categories, showing that identity is, by nature, a social construct, even when it is experienced as a feeling of personal (or internal) selfhood. The tension between the individual and the social emerged as a central theme of my research, and this tension seemed to shape the girls' beliefs about music. As such, their discussions of music embodied the central problem at the heart of late modern culture: the conflict between the self and society.

Throughout this thesis, I have shown how my participants used discussions about music to rationalise this conflict, and how this helped them to make sense of their place in the world. Popular music helped the girls to navigate the demands of a competitive neoliberal economy, allowing them to take up advantageous subject positions based on an idealised notion of selfhood. My findings therefore contradict the widely-held assumption that popular music is harmful to girls, instead illustrating the ways that it can be used positively and productively by girls. Furthermore, my findings undermine stereotypical ideas about young female listeners, showing girls to be critical, reflexive cultural actors who are well aware of the meaning of their musical judgements. Despite the substantial limitations imposed on girls in a patriarchal context, the participants discussed music in ways which subverted notions of naïvety and passivity, instead conjuring up highly-valued personal qualities, such as sophistication, competence and discernment.

Overall, my research highlights the possibilities that popular music affords to girls. Musical discourse offers girls a source of power, albeit one which is constrained within rigid parameters. Ultimately, this study opens up a debate about the nature of empowerment and the ability of individual girls to empower themselves within oppressive social structures. This debate goes far beyond the scope of this particular study, raising wider questions about how discourse works to perpetuate systems of power. As such, my research grounds the issue of musical value firmly within the social world, shedding new light on the complex relationship between audiences and texts. My findings have implications for the study of popular music and its audiences, offering a new perspective which takes into account issues of gender, identity and power.

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Appendix A

Prompts and Question Ideas for Focus Groups and Interviews

How often do you listen to music? Do you listen to music a lot?

What styles of music do you like?

Who are your favourite performers or bands?

Do you like any female performers or girl bands? (Ask this if they mainly mention male performers)

Do you like any male performers or boy bands/male groups? (Ask this if they mainly mention female performers)

What do you think of these performers/groups?

What are your favourite songs?

When do you usually listen to music? Do you ever listen to music when you're doing other activities?

Do you ever use headphones to listen to music?

How do you get your music?

Do you use the internet to stream or download music (e.g. iTunes, Spotify, YouTube, etc.)?

Do you ever listen to the radio? If so, which stations do you like?

Do you watch music videos? If so, what are your favourite music videos?

Have you been to see a live music performance? If so, what was that like?

Do you listen to music with friends?

Do you use the internet to share music with friends (e.g. by using social media)?

Do you and your friends like the same music, or do you have different tastes?

What does your family think of the music you like?

What music does your family (e.g. parents and siblings) listen to? Is there often music on around the house?

Would you say that music plays a big role in your life?

Appendix B

Participant Information

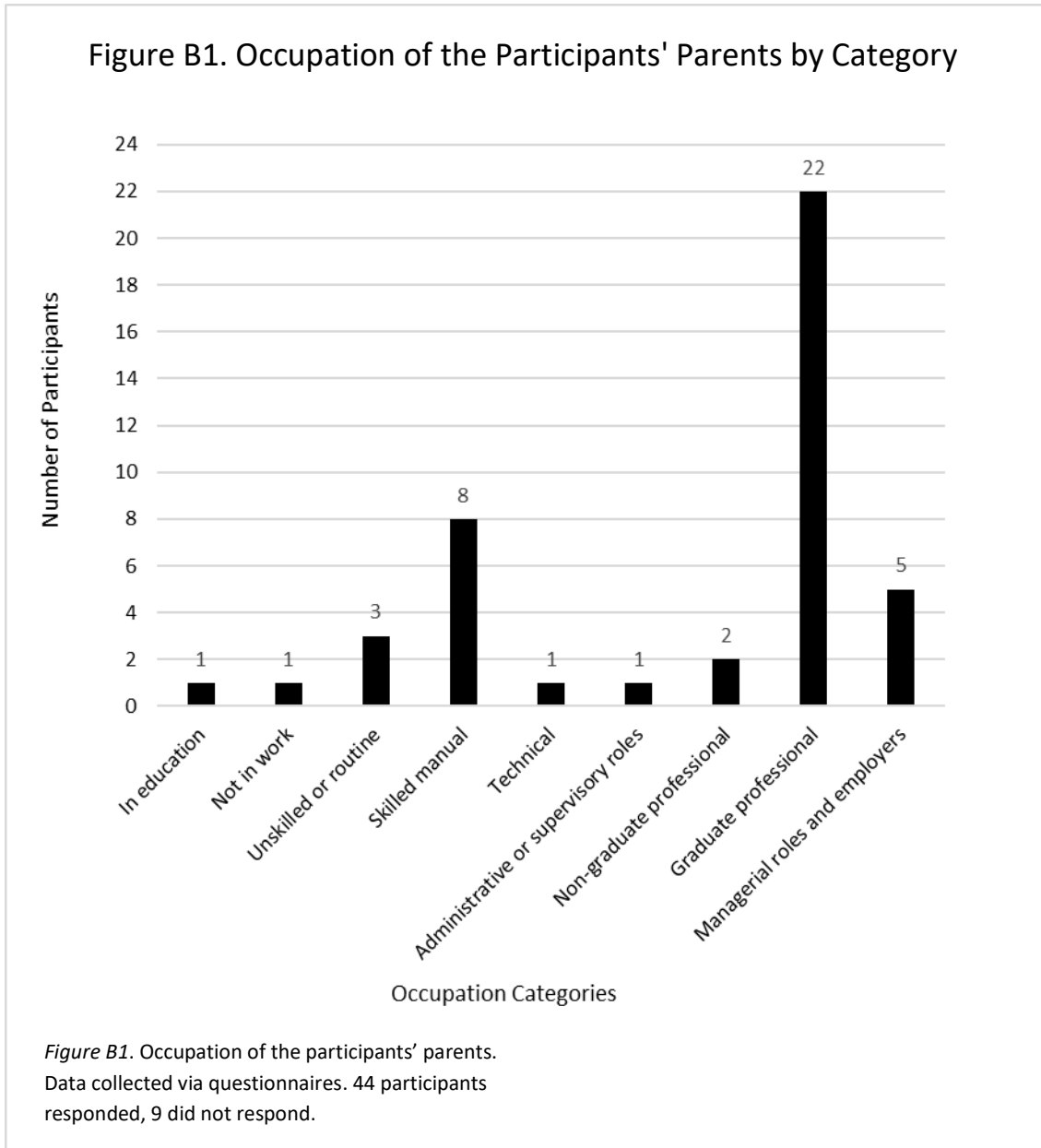


Figure B2. Deprivation Profile of Participants' Neighbourhoods

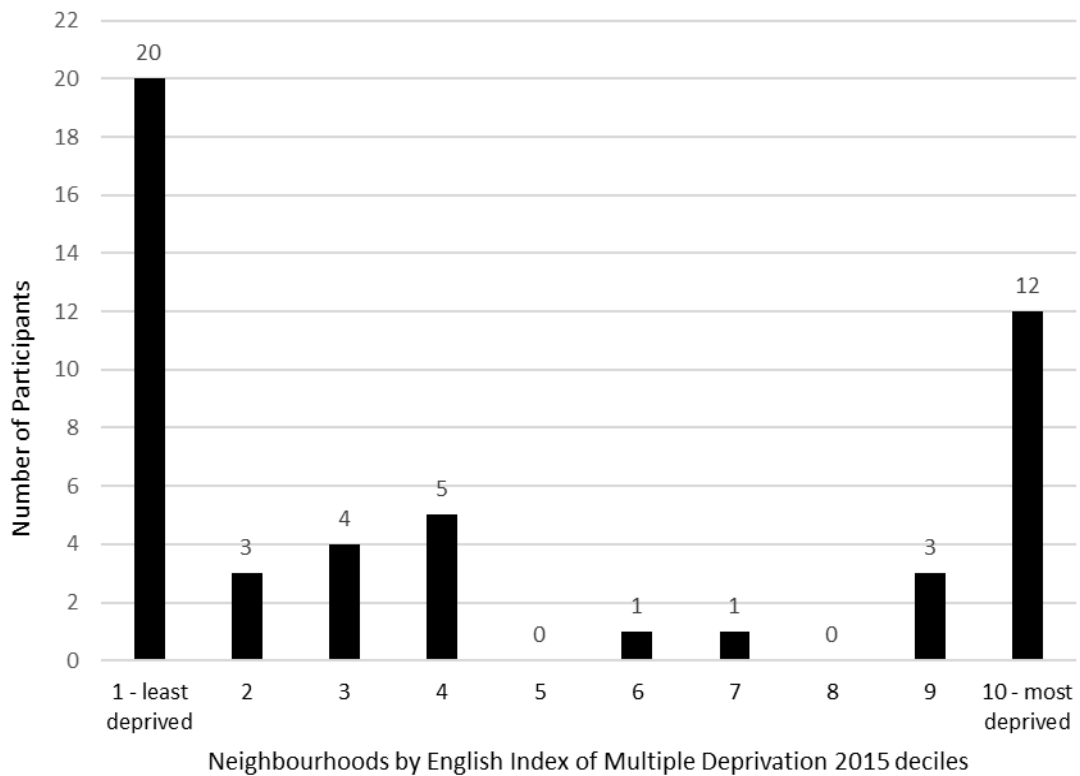


Figure B2. Deprivation profile of participants' neighbourhoods. Data collected via questionnaires. 49 participants responded, 4 did not respond. Information on deprivation profiles of neighbourhoods taken from the Index of Multiple Deprivation from the English Indices of Deprivation 2015 ("Indices of Deprivation 2015 explorer", 2015).

Appendix C

Data Analysis Example

Figure C1. Extract from a Coded Transcript

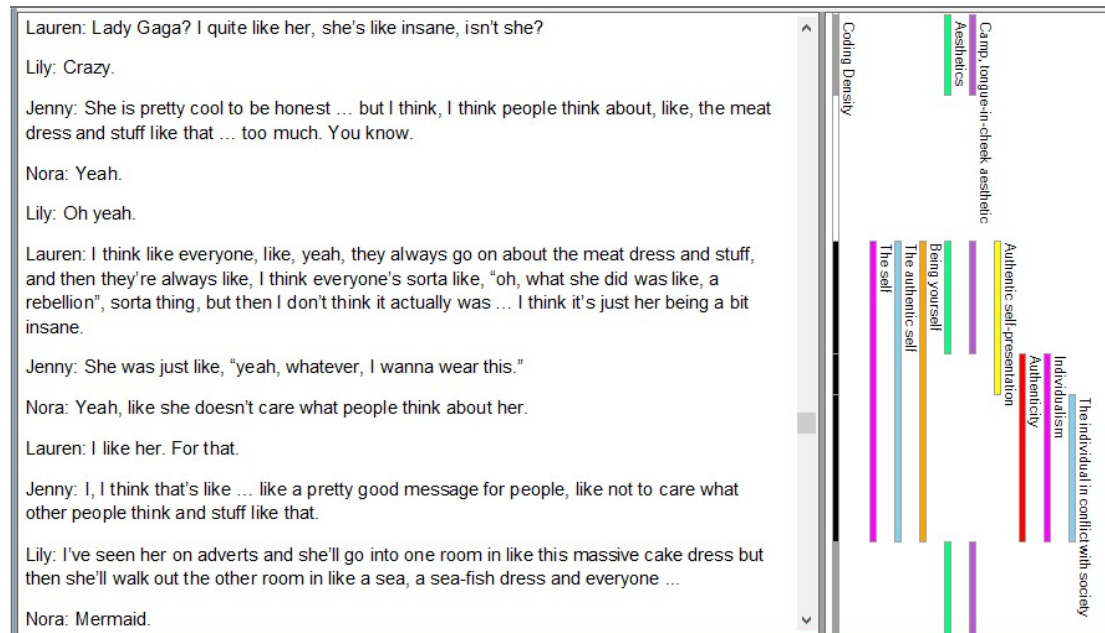


Figure C1. An extract from a coded transcript which was used during my analysis. This image is taken from the software programme NVivo. Codes and themes are shown on the right as "coding stripes". Three broad themes are identified in this extract: the self, authenticity and aesthetics. The other coding stripes represent codes which relate to these themes.