

DESIGNING IDENTITIES: THE WORK OF TEENAGE GIRLS

Susan Hodara

The bag that 13-year-old Ariel carries to dance class used to be the top of her jeans - until she cut off the legs and hand-stitched a straight seam just below the crotch. Original pockets intact, she has added another, a rectangle of blue flannel with yellow stars cut from outgrown pajamas and sewn unevenly into the inside back with embroidery thread, bright red on one side, soft pink on the other. She has fastened a patch of velvety leopard print from the waistband down into the right pocket, and basted two strips of crisscrossed gold taffeta beneath the left pocket. A tangerine shoelace meanders over the backside, leaving space for a sticker of the American flag. A gray car identification tag dangles from one belt loop, a pink plastic pig on a key chain hangs from another.

Ariel's bag serves its purpose well, toting leotard, hip-hop shoes, cell phone, and part of a candy bar. Yet the bag serves another, more significant purpose: it speaks to us of who she is in just the way she wishes to be seen.

Its collage-like assembly mirrors the myriad aesthetic decisions made by adolescent girls about the way they choose to present themselves. Emerging from childhood with newly formed bodies, armed with a greater bombardment of media's messages than ever before, they stand facing mirrors across the country and scrutinizing the image before them. Not only are they searching for clues about who they are becoming, they are cogitating the possibilities of how to express what they already know. Their bodies are their blank canvases on which they have determined to create their very selves, and their choices repeatedly exhibit a combination of intention, conviction, imagination, and exquisite attention to detail.

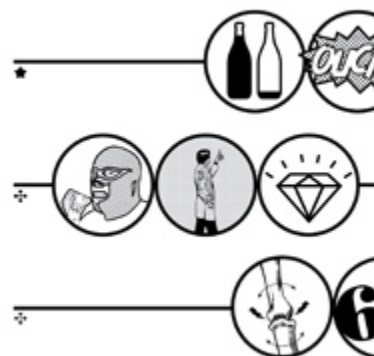
To learn more, i have invited a group of them to gather in my living room and share with me their reflections about the ways they adorn themselves and the thinking behind their selections. Ranging in age from 13 to 17, they are white, upper-middle-class daughters of the Westchester County suburbs of New York City. Some know one another, some don't; and while a few of the labels on their clothing surely overlap, each girl has her own 'look.'

They speak to me openly, enthusiastically, and their comments are punctuated by knowing looks and nods of common understandings. Though they do not claim to represent their generation, they can identify trends with adjectives that refer to brands and social groupings. They are aware of the pressures thrust at them by magazines and movies, the impossible standards and too-perfect role models with which they are regularly confronted. Yet this is not their focus. They are talking today about themselves, their own choices, and the thoughts that go into their preparation for their presentation to the public.

Listen, for example, to 17-year-old Tori, her hair dyed a strawberry red. Tori described one of her signature assemblages, most of which she sewed herself and which she called her "corset outfit." "My hair is in two high pigtails, and I'm wearing a cameo velvet choker and a boned black corset with narrow bra straps," she said. "My skirt, which I made from an old dress, is green plaid and fluffs out to my knees. Under that I have on black and white striped tights and my Doc Marten lace-ups, and a lot of silver bangles on my wrist."

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Such an outfit might not be something 16-year-old Sofie would ever wear, but she certainly wouldn't wear it on a Monday. "Monday is a sweatpants day," she said, "and Tuesday, too, nobody cares." But on Thursdays, she continued with a smile, "I always wear fancy pants. And Friday is a dress-up day - unless I have a test."

Nevertheless, Sofie insisted this did not help her decide what to wear the night before. "You have to wake up in the morning and see how you feel," she asserted, and admitted that on most mornings she changed her clothes at least once in the hour she was awake before leaving the house.

Articulate though some of them are, it is not their reasons they elaborate, mostly of the because-I-like-it sort. Rather, it is their decisions that matter to them, the results that they describe to me with specificity and confidence, proud of their product, pleased with their work.

Sixteen-year-old Jacki depicted one of her favorite outfits, starting with the black beaded choker she said makes her neck look "nice," and the stretchy black T-shirt with rhinestones near the shoulder that she said is "flattering."

"Over that I wear a button-down tan corduroy shirt with ruffles on the sleeves," she continued. "My pants are a dirty denim whose dirtiness matches the tan of the shirt, and my shoes are tan suede that also matches." Her black belt is modeled after a seatbelt, complete with the GM logo in the center of the buckle. Her light brown hair is down, hitting her shoulders, and she wears black eyeliner, which, she said, "is sexy with a black outfit."

For Melanie, age 14, a pair of jeans served as personal muse. With one pair, she said, "I cut off the bottoms and sewed on tasseled fringe, then with a paint brush and bleach, I drew flowers down each leg. On the back pockets, I painted stars." With another pair, she described precisely how she rolls the cuff up with a single fold to reach the bottom of her knee, displaying the red and white striped socks she wears underneath.

Contemporary girls, said Joan Jacobs Brumberg, professor of Feminist, Gender, & Sexuality Studies at Cornell University and author of "The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls" (Vintage, 1997), "have a very wide and nuanced repertoire of opinions about everything that has to do with their physical presentation of themselves." She cited her nine-year-old granddaughter, who, she said, "has preferences RANGING from HER shoes and hair ribbons to the type and width of the straps on her tank top."

Ms. Brumberg's sources for "The Body Project" were the diaries of adolescent girls from the 1830s through the 1990s. Her thesis, set forth in her introduction, is that "girls today make the body into an all-consuming project in ways young women of the past did not."

This is due, she stated, to the preponderance of media imagery to which our entire culture is exposed - "all the visual forces at work in the 21st century," she explained, multiplied by the strategic targeting of teenagers for their buying power. "Kids are impacted by the models of adult life that they see. It's no longer just family and community, but through technology, there's a much broader input."

"It's as if these girls have a camera running in their heads and are perpetually filming themselves and regarding the footage," she said. "They are constantly self-objectifying."

"Certainly girls in the past enjoyed a pretty ribbon, a new dress or a lace collar, she continued, but these days, the cultural setting has ratcheted up the standards. Now it's their entire body, every aspect of themselves."

Which, she maintained, has psychological implications that can lead to "enormous problems with self-confidence, now more than ever before."

Now more than ever before, teenage girls have taken media's center stage for everything from eating disorders, to oversexualization, to calculated meanness, to a hearty normalcy. Ms. Brumberg joins Mary Pipher, Ph.D., author of "Reviving Ophelia" (Ballantine, 1994) and other experts who decry the plight of today's adolescent girls as being oppressed by impossible standards that stifle and sometimes destroy their sense of self. The other end of the spectrum was presented in a recent Newsweek (June 3, 2002), which devoted its cover story, "In Defense of Teen Girls," to the newly named "gamma girl," who embodies confidence, independence and emotional health.

But for the young women in my living room, anorexia, mean queens and gammas hold no more than passing interest. Instead the girls exchange thoughts about how they look and who they are. I am struck by their comfort with one another, as well as the assuredness with which they share their opinions. I imagine that they are in some communal office, brainstorming, experimenting, working independently but carefully aware of their associates, letting themselves influence and be influenced in service of their individual creations.

"When I was in middle school," Tori said, "I realized I didn't want to dress like everyone else. I decided I'd wear clothes that I liked, and if I couldn't find them, I'd make them.

"I don't talk a lot at school," she added. "This is a way for me to express myself." Emily recalled the time Tori wore a pink tutu to school over a pair of shorts.

"When I saw her, it made me happy for the rest of the day," she said.

Ariel mentioned the period of several weeks when she wore the rim of a faded, stretch-out sock around her neck. "I'd cut it up for a shirt I was making and I thought it looked cool as a necklace," she said.

Fourteen-year-old Laura expressed a desire for "tips" - the style of dying the bottom rim of the hair all around. Laura said she'd like hers to be bright pink, and Ariel replied that she'd prefer a "deep purple or midnight blue, hardly noticeable until you went out in the sun.

"It would be subtle," she said, "but there."

"Subtle but there" reflects the multiple levels on which these girls' choices are being made. "It's a fashion statement, it's self-exploration, it's communication, and it's the result of cultural influences they are absorbing," said Amy Lynch, mother of two teenage girls and the founding editor of Daughters magazine.

"They get messages from the broader culture through marketing and media, and then they enforce those messages with one another."

She said those messages have even greater power due to the breakdown of small communities where people know one another throughout their lives. "We are living in a society where we are often strangers," she said, "where we are not recognized as individuals. So the signals we send out by the way we dress ourselves take on a greater importance. For our daughters, who are at a stage where identity is so crucial, that importance is exacerbated. The care with which they make their aesthetic decisions is a cultivated response, almost a survival response."

She said her older daughter Sara, age 15, whose style her mother described as "intentionally uncute," and who has been known to head off to school in a black boa, camouflage shirt and parachute pants, is speaking back to the culture. "It's her way of saying, 'I'm not a plaything. I'm not shallow. There's more to me than you know.'"

This notion of signaling society through fashion choices is one Ms. Brumberg described as "using the body as a message board." "The smallest markers can signify who they are and who their friends are," she said.

For 16-year-old M'elena, whose wavy brown hair reaches nearly to her waist, this is most evident in necklaces. "You can tell a lot about a person by looking at her

necklaces," she said. "A leather choker might mean 'punk;' candy necklaces might say 'raver.' You can even tell what kind of music they listen to."

Ms. Lynch noted that young women "see themselves everywhere, all the time - in models, actresses, performers. These objects of beauty are not unlike themselves, and so they begin to perceive themselves as objects that can be adorned, accessorized and then presented. They know themselves to be canvases on a deep level."

The girls in my living room, along with their counterparts across the country, are engaged in the daily work of painting those canvases. Their palettes are culled from their surroundings and their souls. Some colors are taken from the endless imagery around them, while others are gleaned from their fastidious observation their peers. The rest are drawn from the deepening spark inside each one of them that is no less than the source of themselves.

About this article

This article first appeared in the September/October 2002 issue of [Communications Arts magazine](#) and is reprinted with permission.

About the Author

Susan Hodara is a freelance journalist who contributes regularly to the New York Times and whose work has also appeared in publications including Parents magazine, Daughters magazine, a Showtime website, and salon.com. She serves as Consulting Editor for Westchester Parent newspaper, and was Editor-in-Chief of its sister publication, Manhattan-based Big Apple Parent, where she received a Best Editorial award from Parenting Publications of America for her monthly column. She is currently working on a collection of short memoirs. She lives with her husband and two teenage daughters in Westchester County, New York.

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