

Benefits and Challenges of Analyzing Media Texts by “Hacking” Them in Media and Gender Classes

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Abstract

This study explores benefits and challenges of combining media analysis and production in media and gender classes. I use an ethnographically informed case study methodology to focus on one educational activity aimed at exposing problematic ideologies embedded in these media texts. Through interviews with students and teachers, classroom observations, and analysis of collages produced by young people I explore whether media analysis/media production activities helps students produce oppositional readings of media texts. I argue that, although combining media analysis with media production makes media and gender classes more engaging, teachers using this approach may inadvertently reinforce problematic stereotypes or leave them unexamined.

Keywords: media representations, media literacy education, media production, gender, glossy magazines, case study

This study explores benefits and challenges of helping students analyze media representations of gender in the high school classroom. I focus on one educational activity that had students create collages out of images found in glossy magazines in order to expose problematic ideologies embedded in these media texts. I argue that although combining media analysis with media production makes media and gender classes more engaging, teachers using this approach may inadvertently reinforce problematic stereotypes or leave them unexamined.

This study bases itself on two broad premises: first, that the media play a role in shaping our gender identities; and second, that media literacy education (Buckingham, 2003; Hobbs, 2011) helps audiences ask important questions about the role the media play in their lives.

I use Butler's (1990) conceptualization of gender to argue that the media shape our gender identities through performance and through discursive practices. We perform gender in relation to media texts, buying those that "correspond" to our gender identities—e.g., *Cosmopolitan* if we identify as women, and *Maxim* if we identify as men. Media texts also perform gender towards us, that is, they target us based on our gender, constructing it in the process. In addition, we perform gender in relation to other people by using media texts and tools—think of constructing one's gender identity through

social networks. For example, other people perform gender towards us in how they use media tools to interact with us.

According to Butler, gender is also a discursive practice. The discourse of gender binary, while it might seem to represent the way things are, is, in fact *creating* the way things are through endless repetition. Media representations of gender are an example of how these discursive practices work. Like performance, the discourse of gender in the media constitutes the real, although many people see this cause-effect relationship working the other way around.

The process of examining the role that the media play in shaping our gender identities can be informed by principles of media literacy education, which has a long history of exposing power relationships between audiences and the media (Masterman, 1985). Media literacy education is valuable for dealing with ideologies that are reinforced by, and manifest themselves through the media; it helps students to connect media representations to real-world inequalities, and apply their skills and knowledge towards social action (Hobbs & Moore, 2013). One key media literacy competency is the ability to critically engage with media texts, to pick them apart asking who their author is, what the author's aims were, what values are represented, and what is omitted or hidden (Hobbs, 2011). Media analysis can also be a part of media production, as students learn about the constructed nature of media texts by creating their own messages (Goodman, 2003). Media production allows students to further question choices that authors of media texts make, as well as values and points of view that guide their decisions. Media production can take many shapes and forms; writing a script for an imaginary film or repurposing existing images with help of some glue and scissors is media production as much as creating a video with a Flip camera and iMovie.

Media and gender classes that incorporate media literacy education exist in many schools, although instructors who teach them might not self-identify as media literacy pedagogues. Such classes are not typically part of a standard school curriculum, and instructors usually include them on their own initiative, using a variety of approaches. As a result, little remains known about the complexity of teacher-student interactions that happen in media and gender classrooms.

A number of studies explore courses or interventions that involve discussions about issues of gender as represented in, or manifested through, media texts (Berman & White, 2013; Bullen, 2009; Chung, 2007a, 2007b; Graydon, 1997; Kamler, 1994; Merskin, 2004; Pozner, 2010; Reichert, LaTour, Lambiase, & Adkins, 2007). The majority of these studies are quantitative, and do not show the subtleties of the process or its context. A few qualitative studies (Keown, 2013; Ryden, 2001; Turnbull, 1998) revealed that the learning process in media and gender classes is more complicated not without problems. These authors, as well as scholars who dis-

cuss challenges of media literacy education more broadly (Buckingham, 2003; Hobbs 2011), point out that teachers might push students towards “right” answers, simplify the complexity of the relationship between audiences and media texts, inadvertently reinforce stereotypes, or alienate students by ignoring their backgrounds and experiences. Overall, studies show that media and gender classes offer important benefits by allowing students to reflect on how media texts and their gender identities are intertwined; at the same time, teachers who choose to talk to students about issues of media and gender must be aware of serious challenges, many of them hidden.

The current study contributes to this scholarship by offering an in-depth analysis of one media analysis/media production activity that took place in a U.S. public high school. I use ethnographic methods and the case study approach to tell a complicated story of what exactly happens when students get to analyze media texts by “hacking” them – creating remixes and collages. The broad question that guided my data collection was: What are the benefits and challenges of combining media analysis and media production in media and gender classes? More specifically, I wanted to know what approaches teachers use, what kinds of analyses students produce, how students understand media analysis/production activities, how teachers evaluate students’ work, and how students’ backgrounds and personalities influence the way that they participate in media literacy activities.

Challenges of Media and Gender Classes

In this section, I provide an overview of literature that addresses outcomes of media literacy classes, especially those where issues of gender are discussed. In doing so, I focus on challenges that unique teachers face in these classes.

There exist a number of studies that discuss ways of helping audiences to critically engage with media representations of gender (e.g., Berman & White, 2013; Graydon, 1997; Kamler, 1994; Reichert, et al., 2007). Some scholars recommend using media literacy education to counter problematic media representations of gender without testing such interventions in the classroom (Batchelor, Kitzinger, & Burtney, 2004; Durham, 1999; Pozner, 2010; Robillard, 2012; Rose, 2008). There are also quantitative studies that evaluate effects of media literacy interventions on students’ perceptions of media ideals, usually of femininity (e.g., Coughlin & Kalodner, 2006; Engeln-Maddox & Miller, 2008; Silver, 1999; Wilksch, Tiggemann, & Wade, 2006; Yamamiya, Cash, Melnyk, Posavac, & Posavac, 2005). There are also a few qualitative studies (Keown, 2013; Ryden, 2001; Turnbull, 1998) that examine the implications of teaching and learning in media and gender classrooms.

Quantitative studies usually aim to answer simple yes/no questions.

Was the intervention effective? Should we use media literacy in schools to counter problematic influence of media ideals? Although quantitative studies provide more generalizable results and are useful for showing to policy-makers the effectiveness of certain programs, it is qualitative research that illuminates the research topic by providing thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) of in-class interactions. Quantitative studies conclude that using media literacy education to combat problematic gender stereotypes is usually effective and warranted. Qualitative studies also show that media literacy programs that include discussion of issues of gender have impact on participants. Yet some qualitative studies (Ryden, 2001; Turnbull, 1998) reveal challenges of using media literacy education to help students better understand the role that the media play in shaping their gender identities.

For example, Ryden (2001) pointed out that educational videos used in media and gender classes—such as the documentaries produced by The Media Education Foundation—sometimes apply techniques that are counterproductive. For instance, some of them use male narrators while criticizing patriarchy, or discuss propaganda by making claims that the viewer is supposed to accept without questioning. In addition, Ryden noted that educators relying on these videos in their classes should prepare for unanticipated reactions from students. For example, people of color might feel excluded if the narrator is White. Images of sexualized women that some videos use to illustrate objectification might trigger female viewers to think about the unattainable standards of perfect femininity.

Turnbull (1998) discussed another challenge that teachers in media and gender classes might encounter. She argued that students might say what they think the instructor wants to hear because they are unwilling to accept ridicule by peers or get a bad grade. During her work in an Australian high school, Turnbull discovered that female students' relationships with media texts criticized by teachers were more complex than the teachers thought. Students also criticized these texts during class discussions, but continued to value their messages. Media texts chosen by teachers might have been problematic from a feminist point of view, but at the same time, they provided female students with models that went beyond the traditional gender roles that their families wanted them to emulate. By not taking students' interpretations of the discussed texts into consideration, the teachers failed to connect with the female participants.

Buckingham (2003) described similar problems when talking about media literacy education more broadly. He argued that once students "get" that the teacher wants them to be critical of the media, they start criticizing media texts, but that does not mean that they really understand how to deconstruct media messages. Buckingham argued that many of these problems arise when "ideological analysis...fails to connect with students' lived experience – and hence also fails to make much difference to them" (p. 115).

Buckingham (2003) also contended that when teachers try to make students aware of problematic media representations, they run the risk of oversimplifying media texts they analyze. He noted that if educators offer students only a simplified explanation of how media representations function, young people might be unable to develop a more thorough understanding. As an example, he described one series of lessons about images of women in the media:

Although the material that was being studied was fairly complex, the argument was constantly reduced to simplistic conclusions about the negative influence of the media: women's magazines, which were the primary focus of study, were implicitly accused of a straightforward form of *victimization* of women readers. The pre-defined critical position effectively prevented the students from arriving at a more nuanced account which did justice to their everyday reading and uses of these texts. (pp. 117-118, emphasis in original)

Various scholars have noted some media literacy educators' tendency to protect students from problematic media texts (e.g., Buckingham, 1998a; Hobbs, 2011). I would like to address this tendency in more detail, as it highlights the uneasy relationship between two main strands in media literacy education – protectionism and empowerment. Protectionists position the media as the problem and critical analysis skills as the solution; for those who argue for empowerment, audiences' passivity is the problem and helping students to realize and use their agency is the solution. Media literacy practitioners who lean towards protectionism focus more on steering students towards certain "truths" about the media, while educators who favor the empowerment model ask open-ended questions and allow students to have diverse interpretations. These strands are comparable with traditions of media effects and active audiences in media studies. Protectionism in education and scholarship on media effects are based on the idea that media texts can have direct influence on audiences, and that this impact is often problematic. Empowerment as an instructional approach and theories of active audiences offer a much more optimistic look at the situation, describing audiences as agentic, learning from the media and using media tools effectively. Most media scholars have by now recognized that the relationship between audiences and media texts is complex, and audiences are neither "zombified" by the media, nor entirely free from the media's influence (see Gill, 2007; Hall, 1980; Shaw, 2014). Similarly, most media literacy educators and scholars fall somewhere on a continuum between protectionism and empowerment. However, some teachers might still lean towards the protectionist approach and push students towards "right" answers, even in an inquiry-based classroom.

When combining media analysis with media production, the number of challenges increases. If the teacher wants to have students participate in media production, she should be prepared to deal with what Hobbs and

Moore (2013) call “messy engagement” – a chaotic environment that might not be perceived as learning by some educators, parents, or even students themselves. Media production activities are associated with behavioral problems, noise, and multiple opportunities to be distracted – all of which can challenge the teacher’s ability to have a sense of control over the class. During media production activities, students often work in groups, move around the class, and even leave the premises. They do not have to be quiet, and are allowed to converse among themselves. All of these factors may make media production a daunting challenge for some instructors.

Furthermore, outcomes of media production activities are often unpredictable. Will students create something subversive of dominant ideologies—as teachers hope—or will they merely reproduce conventions of pop cultural texts (Buckingham, 1998b) and their preferred readings (Hall, 1980), undermining norms established in the classroom (Grace & Tobin, 1998)? Grace and Tobin used Bakhtin’s term “carnivalesque” (1968) to describe transgressive media production practices in classes that they had observed. They discovered that “there is something about video production that produces an outpouring of transgressive, excessive moments which push us to question how comfortable we are when the curriculum becomes child-centered” (p. 45). These authors remained optimistic about the potential of media production, arguing that “children’s sexual, grotesque and violent play and expression can be ways of working through rather than just reproducing dominant discourses and undesirable social dynamics, and of building a sense of community in the classroom” (p. 56).

However, it is not yet clear under what circumstances “sexual, grotesque and violent play” can indeed mean transgressing norms that teachers deem problematic, and not simply disrupting instructors’ authority and mocking values that they want students to share. To describe this dilemma in terms of communication theory, we can use Hall’s encoding/decoding model (1980). Teachers want students to deconstruct problematic ideologies embedded in media representations of gender. In other words, they want young people to produce oppositional readings of these media texts. The question is, when media production is used for media analysis, how do we distinguish truly oppositional readings from dominant ones? How do we know that students’ carnivalesque play truly serves teachers’ goal of helping students use their agency to disrupt problematic ideologies?

I argue that we must continue exploring challenges and benefits of media analysis and media production in media literacy classrooms, paying special attention when these two are combined. More specifically, we should look into media analysis/media production activities in media and gender classrooms where facilitating student understanding is of paramount importance and there is evidence of trouble-dominant ideologies. Gender discourse and performance are intrinsically connected with oppression, marginalization, and violence. Intersecting with other identity aspects—

such as race, sexuality, physical ability, class, and religion—gender positions us in the world, shapes our understanding of ourselves, and our interactions with others. If educators do not closely examine students' actions and reactions during activities that aim to help them better understand issues of gender, they may end up reinforcing problematic beliefs and attitudes, or leave them unquestioned altogether.

Research Question

In order to contribute to the research on the challenges and benefits of using media analysis in media and gender classrooms, I asked the following question: *What do thick descriptions of media analysis/media production activities tell us about benefits and challenges of using them in media and gender classes?* More specifically, I wanted to know: What happens during these activities? How do teachers approach these activities? How do students understand and react to them? What kinds of artifacts do students produce? How do we know that students learn to question dominant ideologies and do not simply reproduce them? How do we know that students produce oppositional readings of media texts, and do not simply reinforce dominant ones?

Methods

I used triangulation of ethnographic methods and a case study approach to collect data in one U.S. public school. As part of this case study, I observed three classes taught by two teachers (I call them “Michael” and “Rosey”); I interviewed the teachers and a sample of students, and collected artifacts produced by the young people in class. This strategy allowed me to contextualize activities that students engaged in by observing these activities and talking about them with young people. Interviewing the teachers helped me get an additional insight into classroom strategies. Through the teachers, I was often able to learn details about young people’s backgrounds and personalities that helped me better understand students’ reactions and actions.

Each of the three units that I observed involved analysis of media texts and discussions about media representations of gender. The units featured three major activities: screening *Toy Story* and *Pocahontas*, and hacked ads. This third assignment involved analyzing a magazine cover or ad, and creating a collage that would expose and/or undermine the text’s hidden message using other glossy magazines. This activity is the focus of the current paper.

I apply ethnographic triangulation of interviews, observations, and the artifacts in order to disentangle meanings of several visual remixes pro-

duced by students. The deconstruction offered on the following pages is not a textual analysis per se, but rather a part of an ethnographically informed study that aimed to explore how we can make sense of media texts produced in media and gender classes as part of media analysis/media production activities.

Following the rules set forth by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), which had previously approved the study, participants were informed about the nature of the study and asked to sign consent forms giving me permission to interview, digitally record, and quote them. Students were given assent forms that they could sign if they agreed to participate, and accompanying consent forms for their parents' signatures. In order to maintain participants' confidentiality, on the following pages I use pseudonyms.

Purpose and Structure of the Hacked Ads Activity

The primary goal of this assignment was to help students analyze media texts. It followed about one month of classroom discussions that aimed to teach young people how to use critical lenses (Appleman, 2000) to see hidden meanings (ideologies) in media texts. In Michael's words, the assignment helped students

to practice more deeply that idea that the image that we are presented with... a glance only gives us a piece of that message. So to look and to know what we are looking for, and to know how to analyze something brings things to the surface that we would not have seen before.

The very structure of the activity reinforced this goal. Students split into groups and received magazine ads or covers to hack. The teachers also distributed printouts that students needed to fill in before they started the actual hacking. The printouts urged students to *observe* words, pictures, and colors they saw on the ad/cover; *infer and predict* (e.g. "Who do you think is the target audience of this image?" and "What do you think has been cropped or digitally altered?"); and *bust it open* ("What does this image seem to say is valued in the world?"). Michael's printout contained an additional page with instructions that stated: "Your challenge is to find an ad that attempts to sell us a sense of normalcy and hack it." The teacher's oral instructions also reinforced the goal of doing media analysis. As the students were preparing to work on their ads, Michael told them, "We talked about how these images...are concealing some truth. Figure out what is being sold to you and what is being hidden." Rosey described the assignment by saying, "Your job is to expose, repurpose, or mock."

Once students were done with the printouts, which took about two class meetings, they grabbed scissors, glue, and some glossy magazines from a plastic box where Michael and Rosey had been collecting them. In

the following three classes, the students repurposed the main messages of the original text by remixing images and producing collages. Once collages were ready, young people filled in prompts that urged them to reflect on the activity as a whole. As a culminating activity, students presented an explanation to their peers and the teachers about how they had done their hacking and why.

Deconstructing and Contextualizing Collages

Students in Michael and Rosey's classes approached the hacked ads activity in many different ways. Some did exactly what the teachers wanted them to do: undermine what they saw as the main message. Using Hall's encoding-decoding model, we can describe their actions as deconstructing the dominant reading and producing an oppositional one.

Tilda and Ron started with an *Esquire* cover (Figure 1) showing Harry Potter star Danielle Radcliffe as an icon of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005). He is wearing a suit, and seems to be fresh out of a fight. Judging by his confident posture and direct look, we can assume that he is probably the winner. Tilda told me that for the collage, they found a picture of Radcliffe where he looks younger and more like an "ordinary person." In the remixed picture, the actor is wearing glasses and a sweatshirt, and has a goofy smile on his face. Around the image, they put phrases such as "Beer Binge," "Their Messy Breakup" and "Viagra" to show that normal life is not per-

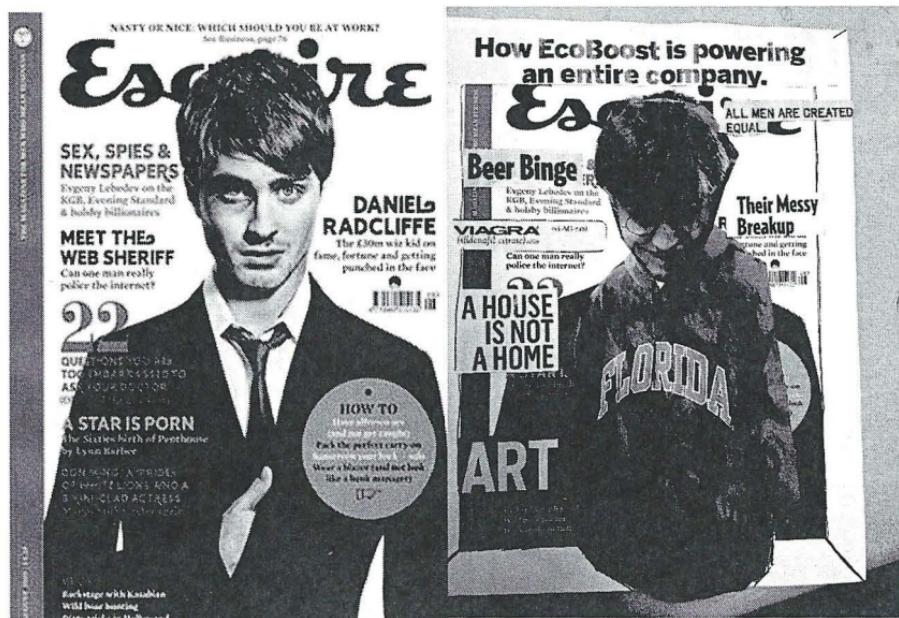


Figure 1. – Hacked cover by Tilda and Ron.

flect, and does not have to be. Some other titles appear to be random, such as "ART" and "How EcoBoost is powering an entire company."

My conversation with Tilda was key for helping me understand the creative choices that her team had made. As Tilda was giving her explanation, she used the term "normalcy" that she had learned in the class. She was the only student who referred to normalcy explaining the collage produced during the hacked ad assignment. Tilda was also one of a few students who was able to articulate that their collage was intended to deconstruct ideals of masculinity or femininity. Filling out the printout, Tilda and Ron wrote that the message conveyed by the image was that "being rich makes you handsome and desired." Tilda explained to me that their collage demonstrated that, "you don't have to look cool and rich to be successful." The remix produced by the team showed that there are different ways of performing masculinity, and that we do not have to privilege only one of them.

This example shows that seeing students' media analysis in the context of their actions and reactions is crucial for interpreting their work. Both Tilda and Ron enjoyed discussions about media representations of gender. When I interviewed Tilda, I learned that she was quite knowledgeable about these issues, and that she enjoyed reading about them and talking about them with friends. Tilda had strong opinions about gender stereotypes, saying, "It's annoying. Cause it's not true, it's not how the real world is. Like, the media portray things completely differently." Tilda's personality might explain her interest in issues of gender. She had androgynous looks, and wore a rainbow button on her backpack. I did not get a chance to interview Ron, but I could see that he was also interested in issues of media and gender. As students were working on hacked ads, I heard Ron say about an ad that showed a (presumably) naked model covered with shoes, "It makes me angry! What does being naked have to do with shoes?" The fact that Ron was friends with Tilda (they were always sitting

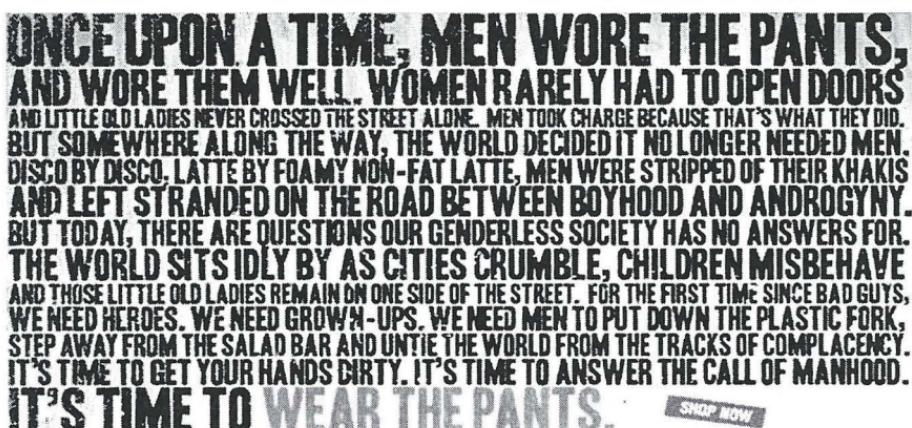


Figure 2. - Dockers Ad.

together in class) made me think that he might be one of the people that the girl talked to about media representations of gender. Ron wore black nail polish, which made him different from the majority of boys I observed and might have led him to reflect on different ways of performing masculinity.

The collage produced by Tilda and Ron might not seem impressive. It is only by contextualizing their remix through conversations with the students and through classroom observations that I was able to conclude that their work in fact showed learning. This example was not exceptional. There were some other groups whose insights were not obvious unless I interpreted their collages through contextualization. For instance, Anna and Robin received an ad for Dockers pants (Figure 2). Both students were appalled by the sexism of the original ad, and created their collage to expose and challenge it. The resulting remix (Figure 3) does not do justice to the depth of their insight. Paradoxically, having too many ideas might have prevented these students from producing a coherent collage. This artifact does not make it clear that flipping through glossy pages, they discovered how women's magazines are, as Anna put it, "all about pleasing a man, being beautiful for a man, and in men's magazines they just talk about sports." Research by such scholars as McRobbie (1991) indeed shows that women's magazines usually give advice to the reader on how to find, please, and keep a man by improving her appearance, cooking skills, or sexual prowess. Men's magazines, in contrast, never give such advice to their readers, instead treating them as adventurers not interested in serious relationships.



Figure 3.—Hacked ad by Anna and Robin

The fact that some students created their collages to show that there are different ways of performing gender did not mean that they produced oppositional readings. For instance, Roger and Steve received a cover with two Black rappers – Lil Wayne and Birdman – wearing stylish hip-hop clothing. In their collage, the students “dressed” the rappers in suits, and added

some images of women to show that the men remained popular despite of the change in their attire. In the reflection on the assignment, the students wrote, "We included hot women to show [that] hard work pays off." This reflection also reveals that the students changed rappers' clothes to show that "there are other ways besides rapping and committing crimes to make a lot of money. Also, there are different ways to show off your money." The allusion to rapping and criminal activity reveals some racial stereotypes that were left unquestioned by the students, who were both White. When Roger and Steve were presenting their collage, Roger explained it the following way: "Women will chase money, no matter what you say." All this evidence suggests that the exercise did not help these two students notice ideologies of sexism, racism, or capitalism either in the media text they were analyzing, or in their own perceptions.

Most students had fun doing the hacked ads exercise, but not all of them took it seriously. Bakhtin's term carnivalesque, which Grace and Tobin (1998) used to discuss transgressive activities of media production, captures well the essence of many of the remixes that young people created. Some of the students intended to produce grotesque collages through their hacking. Although Grace and Tobin argued that grotesque play during media production could indicate that students are working through dominant discourses, contextualizing grotesque remixes produced in Michael and Rosey's classes showed that students often reproduced problematic discourses, or at least left them unquestioned.

Figure 4 shows an image of the original cover that Kevin and Juan worked on in Rosey's class, and the remix that they produced. They re-

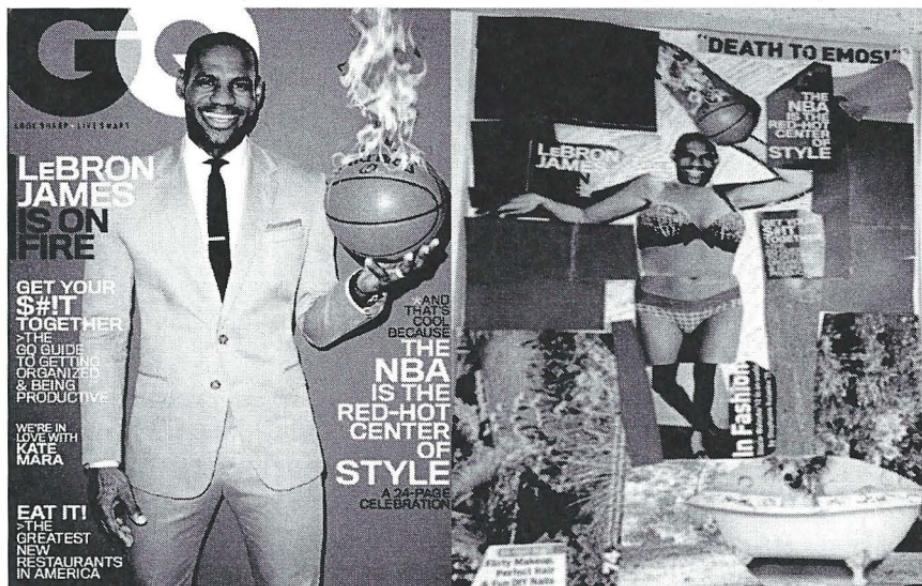


Figure 4. – Hacked cover produced by Kevin and Juan.

ceived a cover of *GQ* showing basketball player LeBron James in an expensive suit holding a ball on fire. The boys added green background to the picture, an inscription “Death to emos!” on top, and a picture of a dog getting a haircut while taking a bath at the bottom. They kept some of the original headlines, and added a cutout from a women’s magazine that says, “Flirty Makeup, Perfect Hair & Fun DIY nails.” Kevin and Juan kept the sportsman’s head and the ball on fire, but changed his body entirely, substituting it with a collage of several women’s bodies. During the presentation, they told the class that they chose a green background because this color is neutral (neither feminine, nor masculine), and that their collage made of female bodies was supposed to represent that men and women are equal. Explaining the dog, Juan said, “Dogs don’t like basketball and can walk around naked,” which produced a burst of laughter from his classmates. As for the “Death to emos!” inscription, this is what Kevin told me about it during the interview:

I am not a big fan of emos either but I don’t think anyone deserves to die cause they are emos. That’s like back in the early 1800s when they said, “Death to all Black people.” That’s what I tried to compare it to, which I think is stupid.

While from the first glance it might seem that Kevin and Juan tried to deconstruct some dominant ideologies – for example, by choosing the neutral green color – careful contextualization shows a more problematic picture. When Kevin talked to the class about putting the sportsman’s head on female bodies, he said, “Here we have a Spanish girl...and a normal White girl,” a remark that was left unquestioned by the teacher. After the class was over, I asked Kevin about the word “normal” in his description. The boy looked anxious and quickly replied, “I am not racist, it is just because I am white.” In addition, the very choice of putting a Black man’s head on women’s bodies can reveal unconscious racism. Scholars that study intersections of masculinity and race point out that emasculating Black men has historically been one of the strategies of dominating them in racist societies (Hunter & Davis, 1992; Staples, 1978).

I did not get a chance to communicate much with Juan, a dark-skinned Latino boy. Observing him in class, I saw that he enjoyed making his classmates and Rosey laugh at his goofy remarks. In his case, going with transgressive grotesque images might have been another way of being funny. This did not necessarily mean that he reproduced the dominant reading of the original cover, or reinforced racist ideologies. Kevin, who was White, was one of the most resistant students in Rosey’s class when it came to talking about media and gender. He sometimes challenged the teacher’s preoccupation with women’s rights, saying that women in the U.S. do not need feminism anymore. During the interview, Kevin said that he understood the point of analyzing media representations of gender, but did not

like doing it; he said, "I always notice the gender stuff now every time I watch commercials...But a lot of times I try to keep it away." He also said that, in his opinion, women already have as many rights as men do, and maybe even more than that. When Kevin was presenting the collage to the class, he argued that its point was to show that men and women are equal. Although this explanation might seem to show that the boy did share the teacher's preoccupation with gender equality, contextualizing Kevin's remark reveals that the boy was not advocating for gender equality, but rather stating that men and women are *already* equal, hence there is no point in fighting for women's rights.

Using the discourse of gender equality might have been a way for some students to give the teachers what they wanted to hear. Melissa and her boyfriend Anthony also produced a grotesque collage. They cut the head of the famous actor Bradley Cooper from their original cover and put it on a female body in a fashionable black dress, which they found in a women's magazine. As they were gluing their collage together, I stopped by and asked them about the logic of their project, "So why did you decide to do that?" "I don't even know!" Melissa replied, laughing. Anthony, however, was quick to make a connection to the theme of the class, stating, "Because we want to show that men and women are equal." I had a chance to observe both Melissa and Anthony in class, and to interview Melissa. Although she agreed that some media messages are diminishing women, she claimed that most differences between men and women are inherent; that they are "normal" and therefore, should not be questioned. Melissa stated:

Some things are just normal. For a girl to wear pink and a guy to wear blue when they are newborn and everything...You don't have to look at it and investigate why it's like that. There's just gender differences. Yeah, everybody wants to be equal but just the way they were making it sound...One's a girl, one's a guy, there *has* to be some difference.

These examples show that a number of students might have added the rhetoric of gender equality as an afterthought as they were explaining their analysis and creative decisions to the teacher.

Michael and Rosey seemed to be mostly happy with collages that their students produced. They saw it as the evidence that young people were grappling with dominant ideologies embedded in media texts. Sometimes they prompted students to examine some of the more problematic interpretations. For example, in response to Roger's reflection, Rosey wrote, "Where in life have you learned that hard work will get you a "hot" woman? TV? Movies? Magazines? Is a woman really a 'prize'?" However, often the teachers did not have enough time to engage in longer discussions with students about the media texts they analyzed and collages they produced.

It would be unfair to blame the teachers for not engaging students in longer conversations, or for failing to contextualize students' work further. As an outsider in the classes, I had a luxury to focus on several students, and observe a variety of details. Michael and Rosey had to teach several other classes in addition to the ones that I was observing, and did not have an opportunity to notice and remember all details. Teachers in U.S. public schools have to deal with educational standards that prioritize a few core subjects over helping students become well-rounded individuals, and with standardized testing that puts major constraints on creativity (Bricker, 1989; Kozol, 1991; Ravitch, 2013). Michael and Rosey deserve admiration because they chose to talk with young people about media and gender, although they did not test their students on these topics in the traditional sense of an examination.

Careful contextualization shows that not all students were able to produce oppositional readings of media representations analyzed in class. Some young people left the dominant readings unquestioned, even though they used the rhetoric of gender equality to explain their decisions. On the other hand, students who were passionate about issues discussed in class and had important insights as they were analyzing media texts sometimes produced remixes that did not do justice to the depth of their understanding. Students who produced grotesque and transgressive collages did not necessarily counter dominant ideologies in the process, as Grace and Tobin (1998) would hope. Overall, my research revealed that media literacy activities that involve media analysis and media production might not be able to help students deconstruct dominant readings, unless these students share teachers' preoccupation with issues of media and gender, and sincerely want to learn more.

What Thick Descriptions Tell Us

The data that I gathered through the triangulation of interviews, observations, and artifacts show that thick descriptions of classroom activities where media representations of gender are analyzed allow us to see a complex picture of students' learning. Combining media analysis and media production to help young people challenge dominant ideologies of gender has certain benefits, but it also has challenges that we cannot ignore. On the one hand, the students I observed very much enjoyed the hacked ads assignment. It was different from usual class meetings as they were able to work in groups and do a hands-on activity instead of simply having a discussion or listening to the teacher. For many students it was an opportunity to discover new knowledge, to delve deeper into issues that they had talked about in class. Hacked ads was a fun and engaging activity that allowed young people to practice media analysis using a variety of visual texts.

On the other hand, some students used this opportunity not to grapple

with dominant ideologies, but simply to have fun, unconstrained by teachers. These young people produced goofy and grotesque remixes just because they wanted to, not in order to work through dominant discourses and undesirable social dynamics as Grace and Tobin (1998) suggested.

One of my research questions asked, “How do we know that students learn to question dominant ideologies and do not simply reproduce them?” My observations indicate that we should not assume that young people have been able to question ideologies simply because students use certain terminology and say what we want to hear; we should pay careful attention to students’ personalities and their reactions to media and gender classes as a whole. This does not mean that teachers need to be suspicious of students who claim that gender equality is important. Rather, instructors in media and gender classes should be moderately optimistic. Becoming a critical thinker, noticing one’s implicit biases, learning to check one’s privilege, and to question things that seem “normal,” are all skills that take time to develop. Although some students might not be able to accomplish these abilities by the end of the course or unit dedicated to media and gender, this does not mean that the teacher has failed. Even such resistant students as Kevin, Roger, and Melissa acknowledged that thanks to Rosey’s classes, they started to notice more gender stereotypes in the media. This, in and of itself, is already a small victory.

Conclusion

This ethnographically informed case study has a number of limitations. By the virtue of being a case study, it does not lend itself to much generalization. It is also important to acknowledge the context of the study – a U.S. public school located in a fairly liberal state. A similar study conducted in a more conservative state, such as Texas, or in a different country, may have yielded very different results.

At the same time, this study allows us to examine nuances of learning that take place in media and gender classes, something that a more generalizable study would not necessarily be able to do. It shows that students with certain backgrounds and interests are more predisposed to learning about media and gender, and are able to use knowledge obtained in media and gender classes to deepen their understanding and even make important discoveries. Even students who resist delving too deeply into media analysis still acquire new knowledge and skills through such curricula. However, my evidence shows that teachers need to be careful in evaluating students’ learning. While young people’s transgressive play can help some of them develop important insights, others might use it simply as an opportunity to have fun in the midst of the boring school routine.

Results of this study are not meant to discourage teachers from including media analysis/media production activities in their classes. Neverthe-

less, I argue that educators—both at the K-12 and college levels—should consider hidden challenges of teaching students about issues of media and gender. In order to better understand young people, educators should rely more on an inquiry-based approach promoted by media literacy education scholars and practitioners (Hobbs, 1998). By asking questions, allowing students to discuss their backgrounds and experiences, and not shutting them down if they make remarks that might seem resistant, educators will be able to tap into the complexity of students' learning. Of course, considering the sheer number of students in many classrooms, time constraints that instructors face, and challenges of allowing debate and conflict into the classroom, it is not easy to let all students express their opinions. Yet I argue that educators still need to do their best to see texts and artifacts that students produce in the context of their personalities, backgrounds, and reactions to classes. Educators can make media and gender classes more effective when they are attentive to the unique styles of their students' learning.

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