Leading Ladies:
The re-production of “successful womanhood” in elite, private girls’ schooling

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(Blackman 1954)

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School of Social Sciences
Anthropology & Sociology

22nd April 2019
Thesis declaration

I, Brittany Welch Bro, certify that:

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Abstract

Schools are crucial sites of social reproduction, in which idealised standards of womanhood are both sustained and transformed. Studies show how structural shifts linked to late modernity, namely in the gendered division of labour, have expanded women’s claims and expectations in employment and family life. Recently, this has been signified in numerous popular culture depictions of educated, young, career women, with glamorous consumer lifestyles. Despite this reality applying to only some, the proliferation of this image operates as a dominant ideal, thus re-defining what it means to be successful. Even as women’s claims and expectations increase, the standards of “successful womanhood” have not become wholly disembedded from structural oppressive conditions, exposing a pattern of coherence to traditional gender norms that continue to shape girls’ lives. This thesis asserts that standards of womanhood have become increasingly convoluted, as new femininities (evidenced in ‘girl-power’ rhetoric, and the rise of professional ‘can-do’ women) have been intermingled with older, traditional femininities (such as being ‘ladylike’, and attractive to men).

The elite girls' schooling context is a crucial site to investigate the construction of ideal womanhood, due to its role in social re-production of gendered (and classed) practices, and in ‘setting the standard’ of society. These schools defend and reproduce this image of ideal womanhood portrayed in popular culture more so than any other. In this thesis, school representations are explored through a systematic image analysis of six leading girls’ schools’ websites across Australia. Crucially, the lived experience of young women who have been subjected to this particular context of womanhood is also documented, through the eyes of ten recent graduates from four Western Australian girls’ schools, supplemented by two administrator interviews from one such school. This data was collected through interviews and focus groups and analysis was carried out by re-conceptualising assertions surrounding
womanhood, namely Rosi Braidotti’s (2006) “schizoid double-pull” and Anita Harris’s (2004) “can-do girls”. Through a feminist approach to structure and agency based on a Bourdieusian conceptual framework of womanhood as practice, this thesis argues that disparities between school rhetoric and everyday practice engenders ambivalent identity formations in young women struggling to make sense of the competing demands of womanhood.
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Chapter One: Interrogating “successful womanhood”

Private School Girls in a Changing World

*For while the discursive field of femininity yields a bounteous crop of possibilities, it also reaps ambiguity, messiness, instability and perseverance.* (Gonick 2004, p. 205)

It is a particularly interesting time to be a woman in Western contexts amid notable surges in feminist movements and awareness. This is contingent with ongoing social change in women’s and men’s patterns of employment and family life within late modernity (Irwin 2005). Broad structural shifts in the gendered division of labour and feminisation of the workforce, for instance, have expanded women’s claims and expectations on an unprecedented scale with substantial gains in educational attainment and wages over the past three decades (Crompton 1999; Slaughter 2012). While women’s empowerment has been loudly celebrated, a total revolution in ideal standards of womanhood has not occurred. In fact, a growing body of literature suggests that there are now more expectations placed on women than ever before (see Allan 2009; Harris 2004; Charles 2013; McRobbie 2004a).

Elite girls’ schools, in particular, are important sites to explore the production of idealised womanhood. Firstly, due to their position serving a clientele largely comprised of the dominant social class: primarily populated by white, upper-middle-class girls. These sites operate as hothouses of high expectations where every student is expected to be a ‘winner’ (McRobbie 2008). Secondly, due to their superior access and means to engage with the
requirements of the labour market, these schools operate as a model for all educational sectors (Charles 2013). Lastly, because elite girls’ schooling has historically paved the way for significant reforms in education and the social role of women and girls (Delamont 1978). Today, within the late modern context of rapid change and destabilized gender relations, elite girls’ schools continue to carry the glossy banner of cutting-edge education and feminist progressivism, presenting themselves as utopian training grounds for all girls to obtain excellence and empowerment (Kenway et al. 2015, p. 154). But is this so? My findings indicate that disparities between school rhetoric and practice create ambivalences and confusion in students who struggle to negotiate the paradoxical demands of womanhood, symbolised in the academic success of [what I call] “all-rounder girls”, which rub up against as well as become enmeshed in the traditional expectations of being “ladylike”.

Through the elite girls’ schooling context, this thesis posits that contemporary socio-political shifts have introduced greater contradictions to the formation of “successful womanhood”. This is demonstrated through my analysis of two sets of interlinked data. I begin by mapping the continuities and changes of gendered representations in the private, elite girls’ schooling context through a systematic image analysis of six leading girls’ schools’ websites across Australia. This mapping provides a rich and detailed backdrop for the analysis of qualitative interviews that documents the lived-experiences of ten recently graduated students from four Western Australian elite girls’ schools, supplemented with two school administrators from one such school. As the data helps show, ambiguities and contradictions have always constituted femininity (Gonick 2004), points I highlight in a brief overview of the broad historical developments in girls’ education, namely in England and Australia. This historical perspective reveals that, alongside ongoing traditional gender norms, schools are undeniably preparing girls for different outcomes than they were thirty years ago, illuminating the changing standards of womanhood.
The young women interviewed for this study are graduates of elite, private girls’ schools located in affluent metropolitan areas of Perth, Western Australia. In consideration of confidentiality, participants and places have been given pseudonyms and the school locations will remain unspecified. Each of these schools were founded around the turn of the Nineteenth-century by Protestant denominations: Protestant Girls’ College (PGC); St Catherine’s Ladies’ College (SCLC); Osmund Anglican School for Girls (Osmund), and St Josephine’s Protestant Girls’ School (St Joe’s). PGC and St Joe’s are situated in a conglomerate of suburbs in the west of Perth that are commonly referred to as the ‘Golden Triangle,’ due to the affluence and influence of its residents. Through these accounts, I examine the tensions and contradictions in negotiating the pushes and pulls of being the “all-rounder girl” (succeeding academically) as well as being “ladylike” (succeeding at “doing girl” in traditional classed and gendered ways).

**Literature and Theory**

Situating the school as a site for production of contradictory and dichotomous femininities, Walkerdine *et al.* (2001) suggests, that superficial representations of girls’ high achievement as clear-cut success stories operate as a thin veneer to mask a fiction of autonomy and power. The authors argue that while middle class girls appear to embody the “have it all” post-feminist discourse of “girl-power” with their flawless bodies and achievements – for young women in their research, this was a performance in which ‘deep anxieties surfaced, anxieties that increasingly seemed to undermine that very performance’ (Walkerdine et al. 2001, p. 167). Indeed, reflecting on my own experience at an elite girls’ school, despite being a fairly competent student, I felt high levels of stress and inadequacy throughout my schooling. A review of research from the 1970s to early 2000s by Skelton and Francis (2012) noted, that achieving excellence and embodying “femininity” continues to necessitate a precarious balancing act for many school girls. A recent resurgence of critical girlhood
studies (see Harris 2004; Gonick 2004; Youdell 2005) unanimously stresses the need to locate cultural images and discourses of ‘over-achieving, consumer-oriented girl-power’ with the complex, multiple, and contradictory nature of girls’ identities (Renold & Allan 2006, p. 458). As Anita Harris notes:

Young women today are standing at the corner of contemporary feminism and neoliberalism … where girls’ lives are complicated by the intersection of constraint, autonomy and selective freedoms. (Harris 2004b, p. xviii)

Post-feminist ideals are notably entrenched in upper and middle-class femininity (Walkerdine and Ringrose 2006, p. 37). Widely circulated in popular cultural forms, post-feminist discourse is characterised by a dismissal of feminism as a relic of the past (Gill & Scharff 2011). Far from a straightforward backlash to feminist progress, the projected idea is that gender equality is essential and thankfully has now been achieved (McRobbie 2004a). Post-feminism is therefore founded on a crucial contradiction whereby feminism is simultaneously celebrated and rejected. Through the assertion that equality has been attained, post-feminist discourse emphasizes female achievement, encouraging women to pursue ‘projects of individualised self-definition and privatized self-expression exemplified in the celebration of lifestyle and consumption choices’ (Gill & Scharff 2011, p. 281).

Rosi Braidotti argues that this post-feminist context creates a “schizoid double-pull”, that is, the concurrent push and pull of traditional and contemporary norms (Braidotti 2006, p. 2). This thesis draws on the double-pull highlighted by Braidotti to explore the contradictions of contemporary young femininities, in part explained by late modern shifts towards more individualising imperatives that emphasize the project of self (O’Connor 2006). Positioned within an established set of traditions, the intermingling of these social drivers in turn
reinforces and may even hyper-extend commitments to glamorous femininity (Charles 2013). This thesis will examine how these etic gendered forces translate in the lived experiences of young women through the qualitative approach outlined above.

There is a growing body of feminist scholarship that explores the contemporary construction of femininity in relation to post-feminist discourse through a focus on the ‘accomplished, empowered and adaptive’ young feminine ideal, variously dubbed ‘top girls’, ‘A1 girls’, ‘Cosmo girls’, and ‘global girls’ (see Allan & Charles 2014; Kenway et al. 2015; Maxwell & Aggleton 2010; McRobbie 2009; 2011). To conceptualise the new ideal type of contemporary young womanhood, this study draws on Anita Harris’s concept of ‘can-do’ girls, introduced in her 2004 book, Future Girl. Harris states:

> Power, opportunities and success are all modelled by the [can-do girl] – a kind of young woman celebrated for her desire, determination and confidence to take charge of her life, seize chances, and achieve her goals (Harris 2004, p. 1).

This fiercely independent girl signifies a notable shift from previous traditional feminine ideals of self-sacrifice, service and dependency (Delamont 1978). Academic achievement has also become paramount towards assuring future prospects of young people in general, though young women in particular (Renold & Allan 2006). This thesis reconceptualises the “can-do girl” as the “all-rounder girl”. Specific to the context of elite girls’ schooling, an all-rounder girl exhibits can-do qualities, such as agency and determination, to excel in a wide range of disciplines, including; performing arts, sports, math, science and English. The pervasiveness of the all-rounder ideal is evidenced through all the graduate self-narratives, in which those most accomplished in the widest range of skills were reported to be held in highest esteem in each schooling context. This conceptualisation of the all-rounder girl helps to encapsulate the meritocratic nature of the current Western liberal school system, defining successful
womanhood in individualistic, value-driven terms. This all-rounder girl is a symbol of the
new formation of feminine ideals towards success-oriented behaviour and those that cannot
or will not embody this ideal are positioned as outside the norm in the schooling context.
However, there remain constant pressures to be “ladylike”, which stem from upper-middle
class gendered expectations and become enmeshed in the all-rounder ideal.

To further explore and theorise the tensions and confusions in students as they struggle to
negotiate the paradoxical demands of “all-rounder girls” and being “ladylike”, this study
chiefly draws on Bourdieu’s notions of habitus and field to conceptualise the qualitative data.
Through a practice approach, this thesis shows the ways young women are not merely
reproducing gender norms, but actively negotiating them. As Claire Charles notes in her
analogous study of girls in an Australian elite girls’ school:

> These citations of normative gendered power relations are not merely repetitions of
gendered injustice; they are moments in which the girls actively negotiate meaning
and struggle to create new meanings (2013, p. 101).

This thesis takes the notion of agentic re-negotiation one step further, and argues that young
women are forming their gendered identities in ambivalent ways. Drawing on the works of
Zygmunt Bauman (1991) and Marnera Gonick (2003; 2006), I develop the relatively under-
explored concept of ambivalence in conjunction with Bourdieu’s notion of ‘divided habitus’.
There are significant links between ambivalence and Bourdieuian habitus, although rarely
made explicit by Bourdieu or the numerous scholars who draw on his theory (Reay et al.
2011, p. 101). Operationalised through young women’s lived experience in elite girls’
schooling, this concept is useful for conceptualising the nuances in young women’s identity
formations. Through ambivalence, girls occupy a multiplicity of subject positions, carving
out their own identities between ideal (all-rounder), traditional (ladylike), and pathologised (Other) femininities, through resistance and re-articulation. Displays of ambivalence are tied to the flexibility afforded to the privileged (see McClintock 1995). However, I suggest that ambivalence speaks more broadly to how all individuals negotiate the destabilized conditions of late modernity and thus has application beyond the elite schooling context.

Drawing on the seminal work of Ulrich Beck (1992), this thesis conceptualises the emergence of late modernity as contingent with the increased value of reflexivity and individualism, in turn reshaping contemporary social norms. Emerging in the mid-1990s amid significant neoliberal reforms, the conditions of late modernity place demands on young women to enact forward-planning, adaptability, and entrepreneurialism, as well as uphold existing hetero-feminine norms to be ‘ladylike’ and ‘desirable to men’ (Charles 2013). Previous studies denote that young, white, middle-class women have been positioned as the ideal “successful” subjects of late modernity (Harris 2004). Yet, becoming a “successful” woman has become increasingly paradoxical – as the elite girls’ schooling context exemplifies.

The very concept of ‘elite’ is problematic and not always self-evident, thus clarification is necessary. Schools in Australia can be broken down into three core sectors: the government or state sector (also known as ‘public’ schools); the Catholic sector; and the independent (or private) sector. The private sector serves a variety of communities, including small communities of no particular privilege. Private schools serving wealthy communities are often considered ‘elite’ due to annual tuition fees that can climb upwards of twenty thousand AUD per student (Charles 2013). The schools examined here sit within this elite category of the private sector, averaging approximately twenty-five thousand AUD in high-school student fees per year. Such schools are viewed as elite due to income that enables superior
facilities and educational opportunities to that of public schools (Charles 2013). Elite schools are seen to cater to the rich and their continued government funding in Australia is central to public equity debates (see Robinson 2018; Gonski et al. 2011). The current Australian schooling climate will be explored further in the following chapter.

In this thesis, I refer to the young women concerned as belonging to the Australian upper-middle class. While a high percentage of students who attend elite schools come from wealthy families, including influential figures in cultural, political, or business spheres, that is not to say that the people sending their daughters to these schools are all part of the hyper-wealthy two per cent (Hartmann 2007). Research conducted in the UK, USA, and Australia, suggest that while elite schools serve these dominant social groups, they can also be a vehicle of social mobility for students who gain admittance into the school, yet do not come from such privileged backgrounds as their peers (whether through scholarship or strict family budgeting) (Fahey et al. 2015, p. 4). Among the schools examined here, the 2017 Index of Community Socio-economic Advantage (ICSEA) recorded the average percentage of students from the top quarter of advantage was sixty-nine per cent (see myschool.edu.au). Whereas, the average distribution of students within the upper-middle quarter of advantage was twenty-five per cent. Predictably, there were negligible percentages of students from the lower quarters of advantage. Thus, the overall distribution of elite clientele resides firmly within the upper class, though not in complete exclusivity.

Distinguishing between the upper-middle and upper classes is difficult, in that, class differences are generally not discussed in terms of social class, but rather, in terms of ‘socio-economic groups’ (Kosunen & Seppänen 2015, p. 339). This is problematic for research because social classes are continuously transforming and their differences still contribute to the formation of societal inequalities (Kosunen & Seppänen 2015, p. 340). Certainly, considerable parental income is essential to attendance at these high-fees schools. Through
their parents’ socio-economic status, those within this study thus belong to the higher social factions of Australia. Nonetheless, the standard of living one can enjoy with a certain income depends on numerous factors, including: how many people their income needs to support, their housing arrangement, and their approach to budgeting (Pressman 2015). Thus, in consideration of this ambiguity between classes, I take a mediated approach in defining participants as ‘upper-middle class’.

Focus and Scope

Much of the existing empirical literature on young women in the schooling context looks at those marginalised through class and race (see Bettie 2014; Anderson & Collins 1992). This thesis addresses the lesser explored realm of elite schooling, arguing the importance of ‘studying up’ (Stich & Colyar 2015). This approach helps to reveal social inequalities in new ways, enriching class analysis and educational studies (Stich & Colyar 2015, p. 730). By examining young women imagined to be ‘setting the pace’ in normative modes of girl-citizenship (Charles 2013, p. 151), this thesis reveals some of the ways idealised femininities are re-produced within educational contexts. This site of social reproduction operates as a microcosm of the current gendered landscape in Western societies, and thus provides situated empirical insights into the forms and representations of broader cultural trends. Koh and Rizvi (2012) argue that in current globalising circumstances, elite schools use narratives of success to appeal to potential clientele. What are the implications of these globalised success stories in conjunction with traditional gender values and how do they affect configurations of young women’s gendered practices?

In this thesis, the presentation of data has two primary functions: firstly, to juxtapose graduate self-narratives according to their embodiment of the all-rounder ideal, and secondly, to draw attention to aporetic instances across these personal accounts. Drawing on Gonick’s (2004, p.
193) conceptualisation of ambivalence, these moments of ‘epistemological splitting’ reveal the tensions in the formation of womanhood and challenge the notion of unproblematic acceptance of dominant feminine discourses. It is hoped that future studies in elite girlhood studies, as well as youth studies more broadly, can further build on and test out the application of ambivalence to better understand the ambiguities of growing up in late modernity.

The findings produce a picture of both resistance and adherence to traditional values by both the schools and their pupils. While conditions may well have changed for students in recent years, hetero-feminine norms still have a lasting and powerful presence in their lives. For the girls in this study at least, hetero-feminine (classed) and traditional ‘ladylike’ norms were often felt to be embedded in the success-driven all-rounder rhetoric. Further, those that cannot or will not participate in this regime of success are positioned as Other. The continuation of traditional hetero-femininities is seen through details such as dress code and “ladylike” rhetoric and illuminates a contradictory environment in which students both support and challenge these notions.

Through the data, this study aims to highlight the ways schools and students enact gendered rhetoric and practices within the context of broader social change. In-so-doing, it contributes to fields of feminist education studies, girlhood studies, and elite school studies from a socio-historical perspective. Through this contribution of knowledge, it seeks to inform understandings of the problematic construction of femininity, and identify fault lines within the Australian private schooling system in relation to gender. Further, this thesis aims to increase awareness of the kinds of structural and social challenges women face in the current
late modern context and question the unattainable post-feminist discourse of white, upper-middle-class girls ‘having it all’.

**Overview**

In *Chapter One*, I examine how these schools have been involved in perpetuating certain classed gender norms over time through a brief historical analysis. This chapter operates to capture the continuities of classed hetero-feminine ‘ladylike’ ideals from the Nineteenth Century as well as the shifting socio-political conditions of education and gender relations through the late Twentieth-century to present. In *Chapter Two*, I unpack the sociological foundations of this thesis, defining key terms and the ways this thesis reconceptualises and operationalises certain notions surrounding late modernity, practice theory, and young womanhood. In *Chapter Three*, I conduct an image analysis of school website promotional images to show the kinds of dominant feminine representations that elite girls’ schools are publically projecting. By examining six leading schools across Australia, we get a sense of the current Australian climate and the ubiquitousness of certain gender norms in this schooling context. The themes and concepts explored in Chapters *One* and *Two* are used to demonstrate the competing ambiguities that contribute to the construction of womanhood, consistent with young women’s lived-experiences reported and analysed in subsequent chapters.

In *Chapter Four*, through the data, I present a picture of “school lives” from the eyes of recent graduates and two school administrators, paying particular attention to how gendered practices play out in recent graduates’ self-narratives. *Chapter Five* explores and synthesizes the data in the previous chapter by providing a biographical analysis of Pia, a girl who is

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¹ Cited in Anne Marie Slaughter’s widely discussed 2012 article, *Why Women Still Can’t Have It All*. Writing as a woman who left a high-profile position in the Obama administration, Slaughter addresses the implausibility of being a mother and a top professional.
largely seen to embody the all-rounder girl, though is sceptical of her schooling – representing ambivalent identity formation. Pia’s experience is then contrasted with biographical analyses of Gemma and Pia, girls who were unable and/or unwilling to fulfil all-rounder expectations, revealing the centrality of hetero-feminine norms and how they are policed and negotiated. I also draw on administrator perspectives to assess the rationale behind leadership strategies and policy implementation relevant to gender; examining ways in which new “progressive” policies maintain older, traditional gender norms simultaneously and inform the “traditional-progressive paradox” characteristic of the schizoid double-pull within this elite schooling social field. I relate these findings to the broader Western context, making assertions about the current sociological conditions of young womanhood through application of Bourdieusian concepts, feminist theory, and the notion of ambivalence. Lastly in Chapter 6, I summarise my findings, discuss key limitations, outline the study’s contributions to knowledge, and several possibilities for future research.
Situating Girls’ Schools and Social Change

What predominates in all change is the persistence of the old substance; disregard of the past is only relative. That is why the principle of change is based on the principle of continuity (Saussure, 1959, p.74)

The following chapter helps to situate certain continuities within the dominant feminine standards that elite girls’ schools are re-producing. This is carried out through a brief historical overview of women’s education and the broader Western socio-political context. As Saussure’s above statement points out, one cannot document change without addressing its continuities. I begin by clarifying, however, that this is not a historical thesis and thus the following section will provide only a brief contextualisation. Firstly, into how the contemporary dominant all-rounder ideal is rooted in Victorian standards of white, upper-middle-class, ladylike virtues. In addition, I examine the significant socio-political changes of late twentieth century to present day, with which this thesis is chiefly concerned. Namely, I investigate the rise of individualistic values and neoliberal reforms, which broadly define late modernity, in light of women and girls’ shifting role in society. Finally, I introduce the theoretical foundations that underpin this thesis.
Early Women’s Education in the Nineteenth Century

Learn like a lady

“[Ladies] are not educated to be wives, but to get husbands”

- Mrs Grey (1850), pioneer of girls’ education (cited in Delamont 1978, p. 135)

The emergence of women’s education in Nineteenth-century England usefully illuminates how certain claims and values came to be embedded in new social configurations. The following section draws upon historical literature to show the development and maintenance of Victorian, upper-middle-class, ladylike ideals in elite girls’ schooling. Crucially, it was during the Victorian period that class and gender spheres became particularly distinct (Aldrich 2004). The changing economic context, in which men increasingly commuted to their place of work, deepened the entrenchment of the breadwinner claim in masculine identity and established the gendered division of labour into disparate employment and domestic domains (Irwin 2005, p. 31). Thus, the ideology of ‘Separate Spheres’ emerged, hinged on the naturalisation of feminine and masculine characteristics (Hughes 2014). By the mid-Nineteenth century, gender differences were engrained in the divergent educational curriculum of girls and boys and had become embodied as the ‘natural’ traits of the sexes (Aldrich 2004, p. 27).

The encompassing Victorian ideal of womanhood was one defined by economic and intellectual dependency, with self-sacrifice, service, moral goodness, and propriety, essential to feminine behaviour (Dyhouse 1981; Marais 2007). Middle and upper class ladies were bound to a ‘showy and useless lifestyle’ and feminists pushed to become free and useful: from ladies, to women and citizens (Brittain 1953; Delamont 1978). Education and work were central to this struggle, though education particularly. As Kenway et al. (2015) note:
[The] new schools for girls, and the educational philosophies that informed them, disputed conventional, upper class-based modes of femininity, and thus, gender relations at the apex of society (p. 154)

Despite the paradoxical and restrictive foundations of early elite girls’ schools, these institutions eventually helped clear the path for other classes to receive education, and for teachers to take their training abroad – setting up institutions internationally, and thus playing a crucial role in feminist progress (Kenway et al. 2015). Prior to the establishment of the first public girls’ schools, notably the North London Collegiate and Cheltenham Ladies’ College, Sara Delamont documents the impractical educational context of the early-Nineteenth century:

For the first fifty years of the 19th century all the daughters of upper and middle classes, except for a few in exceptional nonconformist and intellectual families, received an education which was specifically designed to be useless. They were carefully brought up to be ornamental and not to have any vocation. (Delamont 1978, p. 135, emphasis added)

Girls’ education centrally comprised of ‘the accomplishments,’ which covered a range of ‘useless’ skills to increase eligibility for matrimony, rather than skills for employment or even running a household (Brittain 1953). The Nineteenth-century conceptualisation of femininity for upper-middle-class ladies distinctively shaped girls’ educational curriculum to perpetuate ‘ideal’ constructions of ‘womanly behaviour’ (Theobald 1988, p. 484). This ideal entailed a complex intermingling of virtuous ethics and inane skills suitable for a life of dependency in the private sphere (Delamont 1978). Even into the Twentieth-century, after several independent Protestant and Catholic girls’ schools were established in England, the term “public school” was reserved only for boys’ education, used to signify more thorough
and useful curriculum (Aldrich 2004). Analogously, the development of education in Australia largely retained these frames of reference (Marais 2007).

In the Australian colonial context, standards of education are linked to the tenuous position that the upper and middle classes held in their desire to dissociate from the ‘shame’ of convict settlement (Marais 2007). Thus, they enacted a notably intact gendered script, imported from the English ‘accomplishments’ curriculum (Theobald 1988). Several ‘private ladies’ venture schools’ emerged in the 1860s and 1870s, mirroring the anglophile customs and values of Victorians in the colonies (Hansen & Hansen 1989, p. 2, *cited in* Marais 2007). In which, curriculum was designed for the exclusive training of girls to take up their place as ‘ladies’ with all the desirable traits of ‘highbrow femininity’ (Marais 2007, p. 11). The female leadership of most girls’ schools also helped perpetuate gender stereotypes and an education appropriate to traditional female roles in patriarchal society (Theobald 1988). While many of the headmistresses, largely comprised of Irish nuns and Anglican sisters, were dedicated to offering rigorous academic education for girls, their discourses reflected the tensions and ambivalences in identity formation in an entrenched patriarchal cultural context (Marais 2007, p. 12).

Gender relations in the cultural context of a ‘quasi-pioneering’ society both facilitated and restricted women’s empowerment by comparison to the English context (MacKinnon 1984). Women typically were confronted with hard work, drought, flood, fire, sickness, and isolation – posing a dilemma for those who wished to embody the English ideal ‘lady of leisure’ (Marais 2007; MacKinnon 1984). This tension in identity failed to produce education for girls that met with the realities of existence in colonial Australia. Indeed, girls’ curriculum in this pioneering context did not come close to equating that of boys, where women were still held as the ‘purveyors of morality, decorum and manners’ (Marais 2007, p. 11). Previous studies indicate that self-ascribed moral virtue has historically been the basis of the
Australian upper-middle-class’s self-identity (Brett 2003, p. 11). Wherein, women’s piousness, in particular, functions as emblematic of the ‘moral qualities’ that distinguish this ‘older, Anglo-Australian, moral middle-class’ (Butler et al. 2017, p. 2412).

In Western Australia, many elite girls’ schools have retained the title of “Ladies’ College” in continuation of the middle-upper-class “finishing school” ideology. This ideology is seen throughout the four local schooling histories. A School History of SCLC during 1921 to 1937 reveals the ongoing emphasis on docile and “proper” feminine dispositions. Namely, in a Headmistress’s address to students that strictly prohibited any ‘unseemly barracking’ at Interschool sports, and in a student account that denoted, ‘to correct our posture, each girl in turn had to walk along the length of the school hall’ (Miles 1987, p. 135). Further historical school records show such ladylike norms enduring well into the Twentieth century (Miles 1987). For instance, St Joe’s 1982 School Chronicle denotes one former student’s recollection of her schooling during the 1950s: ‘We had no careers guidance and we had no idea what was available to us as people in the real world’ (Miles 1987, p. 135). Interestingly, this individual went on to become a member of the WA Women’s Hall of Fame in recognition of her work in women’s rights, politics and journalism (Australian Women’s Register 2011). This example captures both the shifting post-war landscape that enabled greater opportunity for women entering the workforce, as well as the prevalence of Victorian, middle-upper-class feminine norms in these schools.

All-rounder origins: Women’s “mobility of mind”

Roots of the dominant all-rounder ideal in elite girls’ schooling can be traced back to the Victorian belief in separate gendered modes of knowledge. As mentioned earlier, gender differences in modes of knowing became more distinct in the Nineteenth-century, wherein, women’s capacity for knowledge was viewed as ‘superficial’, and men’s knowledge as
‘thorough’ (Aldrich 2004, p. 28). Ironically, Richard Aldrich points out that these ‘discursive bipolarities’ in gendered modes of knowing were actually what enabled girls to learn topics that were considered ‘masculine’, due to the assumption that they would be unable to appropriate them (2004, p. 28). Even so, the gendered assumption that women had only a broad and superficial capacity for learning informed the curriculum in girls’ education and has been maintained to some extent to this day (Aldrich 2004).

It was maintained that ‘women’s mobility of mind’ was needed ‘to uphold their lack of fitness for the higher class of serious business’ (Mill 1970, pp. 194, 198). A comment made by Victorian author, Mrs Gaskell, concerning the assumed arrangements of society exemplifies this belief:

A woman’s usefulness depends on her power of diffusing herself, and making her influence felt at a number of points at once. She cannot withdraw herself to a study [as was the norm for men]. Her place is in the drawing room, in the midst of others, within everyone’s call, and at the ready disposal of a number of claimants whose demands, though separately trifling, are collectively important (Beale 1869, p. 37)

The following statement by prominent Eighteenth-century thinker, Erasmus Darwin, captures this belief: ‘Great eminence in almost anything is sometimes injurious to a young lady’ (Darwin 1797, pp. 10, 14). What is noteworthy about the Victorian female curriculum, however, is not its femininity per se, but its breadth (Aldrich 2004). While girls were permitted to study disciplines previously reserved for men, the overall tone of women’s education was one of social privilege, exclusivity, and emphasis on the accomplishments. The curriculum often included subjects such as ‘reading, writing, grammar, ‘polite literature’ (plays, poetry, romances), arithmetic, geography, history, languages, natural history, morals, music, dancing, drawing, painting and embroidery’ (Marais 2007, p. 10).
As Delamont (1978) notes, educational reformers inevitably became tangled in a web of conflicting demands and directives. Not only by the critics and enemies of women’s education, but also by the parents who largely shared Darwin’s above view that advanced education was detrimental to their daughters’ chances of catching a husband (Delamont 1978, p. 141). Hence, the aims of education for women were contorted by competing orthodoxies: to maintain respectable feminine ideals, to receive a good “masculine” education, and to improve girls’ chances of money and marriage (Delamont 1978). What’s more, the pioneers had little hope of freeing themselves without compromising the whole mission of female education (Delamont 1978, p. 140). Thus, a peculiar balancing act of girls’ schools as both finishing schools and feminist academies ensued (Marais 2007).

The balancing of competing orthodoxies is evidenced across all four focus schools throughout the Twentieth-century. Principal’s Reports detail the struggle to provide a thorough academic education and comply with parents’ demands for domestic skills and ‘the accomplishments’. As PGC’s 1930 Principal Report notes, ‘The objection of uselessness has been raised not infrequently against every subject in our curriculum’ (Miles 1987, p. 72). This captures the contradictory nature of competing orthodoxies, further evidenced by the following excerpt from SCLC’s 1925 prospectus:

The “extras” that mean so much in a complete education, such as music, drawing and elocution, are taught at school during school hours. Attention is specially paid to the neatness of both textbooks and exercise books. (cited in Miles 1987, p. 138)

Here we see how ‘useless’ finishing school skills are both highly valued yet also classified as “extras” of the central curriculum. Elite girls’ schools have continued to uphold these ideals of traditional and classed feminine acceptability. This is evidenced in stringent “proper” uniform regulations and their extensive curriculum, which often still include ‘domestic
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sciences’, such as sewing, cooking, and childcare (Miles 1987). This suggests that the allrounder ideal has foundations in the normative expectation for ladies to acquire the widest range of skills and thus fulfil standards of desirable upper-middle-class womanhood. It could also be argued, that the Victorian perception of broad female modes of knowledge has paved the way for the contemporary view of young women as the ideal, late-modern reflexive subjects. For instance, we see the ongoing socialisation of women’s ‘mobility of mind’ through the common assumption that women are better at ‘multi-tasking’ than men (Stoet et al. 2013).

While the ascribing of shallow, far-reaching modes of knowledge initially undermined women’s legitimacy in the workforce, the value of this skillset has decidedly flipped in the current neoliberal, globalised labour market that demands diversified proficiencies, interpersonal capabilities, and increased flexibility (Skelton & Francis 2012). Evidently, the social role of white upper-middle-class women and girls has vastly shifted since Victorian times: from ornamental “angels of the house” (Hughes 2014) to professional “have-it-all supergirls” (Renold & Allan 2006, p. 466). Certainly, the founding of elite girls’ schooling played a central role in unsettling the classed gender spheres of the Nineteenth-century, fundamental in eventual feminist advancement in work and education (Kenway et al. 2015).

**Strive not thrive: The feminine Protestant ethic**

*The object of girls’ education is not to turn out finished scholars as to give an intelligent and sympathetic interest in life* (Aldrich 2004, p. 29)

Though not central to this thesis, it is important to address the influence of religious values on women’s education. Christian values, in particular, underwrite the moral and social systems in the English and Australian Independent schooling context (Marais 2007). The Independent Schools Council of Australia (ISCA) reported in their ‘2017 Snapshot’ that 85 per cent of all
independent schools have a religious affiliation, a majority of which are Anglican (Independent Schools Council of Australia 2017). While all schools explored in this study were founded as Protestant, graduates nonetheless reported that they operate as largely secular institutions. This reflects broader secularisation trends in Australia and elite schools’ vested interest in re-presenting liberal progressivism. Nonetheless, the Protestant ethic within their value systems continues to inform the dominant schemas within their schooling social field, seen through emphasis on “the whole woman,” self-sacrifice and service. These values are evidenced across the early prospectuses and annual reports of the four schools examined here. A noteworthy example is in SCLC’s 1917 prospectus, which states:

The Sisters’ aim, above all, at forming character, and strive so to educate their pupils that they gain distinction in examination lists, but also be fitted to gain distinction in the greater business of life. For this they must learn truthfulness, self-reliance, alertness of mind, trustworthiness, discipline, loyalty of God and Country – qualities worth cultivating, and worth many sacrifices to attain. (cited in Miles 1987, p. 36)

Such rhetoric of character-building, sacrifice, and “learning to love your lot” are all signifiers of the Protestant ethic, which manifests in women as intrinsic and altruistic work values, community involvement, and upward striving (Mannheim 1988). The Protestant ethic is further demonstrated in St Joe’s 1931 Chronical, stating, ‘the happiness lies, of course, not so much in any knowledge we achieve as in the work we put into it’ (Miles 1987, p. 169)

Protestant values closely align with and inform the traditional feminine virtues of Victorian girls’ education already discussed – towards production of ladies who strive to find the intrinsic value of knowledge and who are altruistically committed to family life and service.

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2 According to the 2011 Australian National Census, the rate of people reporting no religion in Australia has increased substantially over the past hundred years, from one in 250 people to one in five. Notably, the number of people who reported being an Atheist almost doubled between 2006 and 2011, from 31,300 to 58,900 people (ABS 2013).
Despite these schools largely functioning as secular, such gendered religious values have been re-articulated to promote eliteness through maintenance of tradition and good citizenship. This illuminates the ways engrained traditional gender relations can be re-shaped and continue to inform doxic attitudes within this social field, even if the strong Christian foundations that prompted their emergence in Australia no longer exist. The continuity and re-articulation of Protestant values is perhaps best captured in a comment made by a school administrator in this study:

I have a belief that schools have actually replaced churches in many ways. That schools have really become the parish of the Twenty-first century because they’re where communities congregate … I’ve found it especially important to promote values.

Contemporary conditions of gender and education

Australian elite girls’ schooling in the Twentieth-century

“It is surely one of the functions of education to show that the best things in life have no money-value, but are of that treasure which neither moth nor rust doth corrupt”

– Celebrated and long-serving PGC Principal, 1930 (cited in Miles 1987, p. 73)

The curriculum in women’s education remained largely untouched in Australia until an era of landmark educational change during the 1970s and 1980s. The shift emerged in response to historical and social events with many scholars contributing to the debate on educational inequity and the kinds of education provided to girls (see MacKinnon 1984; Deem 1992; Purvis 1992). After a long period of conservative rule, the new Whitlam Labor government commissioned the Karmel Report (1973), which directly addressed configurations of gendered inequality in education (Marais 2007). This led to the first major Australian Government-funded report into sexism in the curricula, Girls, School and Society (1975).
Subsequently, a movement towards a more ‘robust’ and ‘masculine’ education for girls took place, which significantly coincided with the feminisation of the teaching profession (Marais 2007, p. 13).

Despite increased participation in masculine subjects, such as mathematics, science, and technology, patterns in women’s career choices remained largely unchanged in the 1990s (Marais 2007). Limitations in effective policy implementations have been well documented: the literature quite unanimously suggests that a consistent and pervasive model of curriculum change to destabilize gender power relations never took place (see Kenway & Willis 1986; Foster, Kimmel & Skelton 2001). Since the late-1970s, young women in elite private schooling have experienced a masculinised curriculum with the ‘accomplishments’ as ‘residual’ curriculum stubbornly persisting to inform contemporary feminine norms (Marais 2007).

Elite girls’ schools continue to reflect great parental expectations towards their daughter’s entry into ‘respectable’ university and employment pathways, as well as the cultural capital and potential for social mobility forged through the ‘connections’ acquired in mingling with a rarefied cultural ethos (Marais 2007, p. 1). Victorian standards of respectability and acceptable ladylike behaviour remain entrenched in the elite girls’ schooling social field, and some such standards, namely women’s mobility of mind, have gained renewed import in the late modern context. The question remains, what has contributed to these recent shifts and what does this tell us about young women’s lived-experiences within the elite girls’ schooling context?
The Australian Educational Marketplace

Previous studies (Wilkins 2012; Drew 2013; Symes 1998) argue that the current prevailing orthodoxy of modern schooling is dictated by a neoliberal economic agenda founded on consumerism, competition and individualism within an open marketplace. Fisher (2009, p. 1) describes this competition as the ‘business ontology’ of schools, in which schools operate like corporate entities ‘jostling to win the hearts and minds of consumers’ (Wilkins 2012, p. 70).

The literature has identified neoliberal policies as a prominent contributor to the competitive education marketplace, emerging in the 1970s and 80s through governmental subsidization of the private provision of services (Davies & Bansel 2007). In Australia specifically, the 1990s saw ongoing governmental financial sponsorship of the expanding private sector, linked to the ferocity of neoliberal policy-making (Drew 2013, p. 176). Such policies have placed demands on parents as active consumers to make informed choices about education services (Wilkins 2012). The public provision of free education has subsequently been ‘reconstituted under neo-liberalism as part of the market’, resulting in the steady decline of public education with many moving to private schooling (Davies & Bansel 2007, p. 254). This has resulted in the growth of the Australian private schooling sector and the exposure of public schools to the competition of private education (Drew 2013). Consequently, traditional elite schooling norms, striving for excellence and making a difference, have broadened to be expected of all girls in all schools, as elite schoolgirls are ‘setting the pace’ in these forms of citizenship (Charles 2013, p. 150). Through such socio-political processes, impression management strategies have become a crucial aspect of the educational enterprise. Within this context, schools have increasingly employed aesthetic symbolism to promote their ideological narratives as a means of defining themselves, culturally, historically and pedagogically, in a field saturated by choice (Wilkins 2012, p. 69).
Changes in gender relations over the late Twentieth-century to present

To a much greater extent than men, women are required to work on and transform the self, to regulate every aspect of their conduct, and to present all their actions as freely chosen. Could it be that neoliberalism is *always* gendered, and that women are constructed as its ideal subjects? (Gill and Scharff, 2011 pg. 7, emphasis in original)

As the dominant all-rounder ideal exemplifies, the significance of diversified skills has shifted in late modernity. Decreased job stability in late capitalist economies now requires individuals to demonstrate adaptive and performative skills and qualifications (Skelton & Francis 2012). Accounts of social change highlight the role of individualisation and marketization in shaping human experience in contemporary society, namely the prominence of reflexivity; the expansion of autonomous action, emphasis on claims of equality, and the imposed necessity of making the ‘right’ choices in a ‘knowledge society’ (Irwin 2005, p. 14).

In his influential analysis of individualism in late modernity, Ulrich Beck (2000) posits that traditional labour is being replaced by knowledge as capital, resulting in labour being constantly reshaped and revalued by knowledge. In short, this means that jobs are no longer ‘for life’ and as such, individuals are expected to reinvent themselves through upskilling (Skelton & Francis 2012, p. 443).

Reflexive trends in recent decades have arguably facilitated the production of social spaces where people can challenge previously taken-for-granted assumptions and the status quo, seen through political activism in women’s and LGBTQI rights (Ruspini 2013). As feminist social commentator, Jane Caro, notes, the past five years have undergone ‘turbocharged change’, in relation to the politicisation and mobilisation of issues surrounding gender and sexuality (Caro 2019). This is evidenced by the Women’s March and the #MeToo movement.
in 2017. The Women’s March was a worldwide protest on January 21st, 2017, prompted by the inauguration of President Donald Trump. The flagship Women’s March in Washington, USA, was documented as the largest single-day peaceful protest in US history and has become an annual international movement (Broomfield 2017). The #MeToo movement also emerged in the United States in 2017, ignited by viral tweets from actress, Alyssa Milano, and other celebrities, linked to allegations that surfaced against Hollywood tycoon, Harvey Weinstein. Subsequently, many women and men across the globe felt empowered to share their stories of sexual harassment on social media by using the hashtag #MeToo, hailing in greater awareness and perhaps greater accountability for rape culture (Civitello 2017).

Individualisation theorists, including Ulrich Beck (1992) and Zygmunt Bauman (2002), have helped to conceptualise shifting gender relations, offering a particular explanation of how such trends contribute to contemporary transformations (Irwin 2005). However, these broad ‘trend theses’ documenting shifts in social production often fail to sufficiently account for social change. As a result, such theorising may be inadequate in accurately specifying how individuals are located within social structures and how their subjective experiences can provide valuable ways of seeing differing fragments of the system and not, indeed, the system as a whole (Irwin 2005). Nonetheless, such trend theses are used here to establish an understanding of the etic forces that influence emic conditions, explored in later chapters.

The notion of girls who can ‘do it all’ is suggested to be linked with the individualisation of the wider socio-political landscape (Charles 2013). Beck’s seminal example of individualisation is the commodification of women’s labour and the subsequent emergence of individualised gender relations (Irwin 2005). This view maintains that individualisation has undermined the asymmetrical gendered division of labour that sustained family demands, leading to new stresses on family life and relationships (Beck 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim
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2002). Like Braidotti, Beck posits that the late capitalist system generates social relations with inherent (and growing) contradictions between reproduction and production (Beck 1992; Beck & Gernshein-Beck 2002). Building on Beck, Sarah Irwin (2005) suggests that social disintegration stems from ‘deep-end pressures of systemic contradictions, for some an upshot of the commodification of female labour and the marketization of family relations’ (Irwin 2005, p. 12). From this perspective, as more women become involved in the field of paid employment, increasing tensions between traditional and contemporary norms will become more obvious and impactful.

Certain demographic changes have substantiated the claims of individualist theorists; notably, the steady trend of fertility decline in Western countries since the late Nineteenth-century (with exclusion of the baby boom in post-war decades) (Irwin 2005). This transformation in fertility patterns is not just attributed to improved contraceptive technologies, but also to changes in the relative position of gender and generational groups, linked to shifts in what constitutes appropriate social roles for men and women, adults and children (Irwin 2005, p. 54). Namely, the shift from industrial to late modernity has enabled the reconfiguration of gendered ideas of ‘work’ and ‘care’, relevant to women’s relative attractiveness to employers in the new prominence of service economies (Irving 2008).

Gender, as a dimension of difference, has variable salience. For instance, Irwin (2005) notes that in some contexts, older patterns of gender difference and inequalities are reproduced, and in other contexts patterns of ‘dedifferentiation’ emerge; in which gender is less relevant than it was previously, with respect to life paths and social roles (p. 54). The findings of this thesis indicate that elite girls’ schools are sites that produce both older and newer patterns of gender difference, expanding this conceptualisation of the mutable significance of gender.
Central to the discussion surrounding social gendered shifts, is the argument that we are experiencing a ‘reshaping of gender’ (Irwin 2005, p. 55). These developments have been instigated, in part, by processes such as: changes in the demographic availability of women’s work in the labour market, and changes in women’s claim to responsibilities previously belonging exclusively to men (Irwin 2005; Ruspini 2013). The impact of changing gender relations is evident in significant demographic shifts in family composition over the latter part of the Twentieth-century; such as, increased rates of childlessness, patterns in deferred timing of parenthood, significant increases in divorce rates, and increases in families headed by single parents (Ruspini 2013). Given these trends, Beck (1992) asserts that their logical conclusion is towards a market family, in which individuals are solely rewarded by their labour and thus cannot sustain dependents. He states that ‘the ultimate market society is a childless society – unless the children grow up with mobile, single fathers and mothers’ (p. 116). This nihilistic projection of the demise in traditional family composition highlights the limitations of Beck’s somewhat exaggerated rendering of ‘dis-embeddedness’ as a central element of individualisation. Nonetheless, the notion of individualisation serves as a useful conceptualising tool of social change in the current late modern context.

**Contextualising contemporary womanhood and education**

What do trends of reflexivity and individualism mean for girls growing up in Australia today? Harris (2004, p. 8) asserts that neoliberal discourse positions young women to embody self-determination in pursuit of dazzling high-flying careers. In order for girls to live up to this new ideal formation of womanhood, they are expected to participate in a sexual ‘contract’ that necessitates deferred motherhood (Charles 2013). This presents a schizoid merging of old and new ideas, in which the value of entrepreneurial self-making is merged with traditional hetero-normative ideas about marrying and childbearing at the “right” age.
Furthermore, it pathologizes ‘other’ girls who cannot or do not live up to these standards (Harris 2004). In the context of individualistic values, this is viewed in light of individual failings and/or successes, neglecting structural constraints and underlying class divisions between women.

Harris (2004) suggests that the increasing fixation on girls as represented through a paradigm of success and failure is indicative of their new and specific historical location. The constituents of contemporary times inform this dichotomy, rendering young womanhood as a site of either new possibilities or problems, evident in the intense public interest in their success, polarised as either ‘can-do’ or ‘at-risk’ (Harris 2004, p. 12). As already noted, significant social shifts in the last few decades have been instrumental in transforming family models, gender identities and citizenship. The de-standardisation and growing precariousness of labour; expansion of higher education; and cultural and economic globalisation have generated new ‘choices’ for individuals. However, young women’s life pathways are demonstrated as distinctly regulated by their embedded identity in late modernity (Harris 2004). Angela McRobbie (2001, p. 1) asserts that ‘girls, including their bodies, their labour power, and their social behaviour, are now the subject of governmentality to an unprecedented degree’. This regulation is contingent with the substantial amount of purchasing-power that young women now have as the key consumer group in late capitalist economies (Harris 2004; McRobbie 2000). Subsequently, marketing towards young women has become increasing aggressive, selling the post-feminist fantasy through brands and slogans that directly employ ‘girl-power’ rhetoric. The following figures, though dated, provide some indication of young women’s considerable contribution to Western economies, even excluding the influence of girls over family purchases: the collective income of eleven-to-seventeen-year olds’ in Australia was $4.6 billion AUD (Nikas 1998). Moreover, in the US, the spending power of eight-to-eighteen-year olds was calculated at $67 billion USD
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(Cuneo 2002). Thus, we begin to see the significant economic investment that can-do girls symbolise in late modernity.

It is important to recognise that discourses concerning identity do not remain constant over time and are often subject to resistance, change and reconstruction (Skeggs 1997). An apparent recent resurgence in etiquette programs and guides exemplify the contradictory intermingling of traditional and contemporary values (Allan 2009, p. 147). Allan (2009) suggests that we are currently experiencing a revival of interest in ‘ladylike’ conduct, evident in popular culture – such as the recent popular English reality-television program, Ladette to Lady, in which working-class party girls compete in an etiquette course to transform into ladies ‘skilled in genteel conversation, elegant cooking and the womanly arts’ (Allan 2009, p. 147). The program’s success led to an Australian spin-off series in the same format (Channel 9 2009). The graduate data further supports this claim, with a report of one school recently introducing a ball etiquette course for students prior to their Year 12 school ball. This renewed focus on girls’ appropriate social behaviour, as Angela McRobbie (2000) suggests, is because ‘young women ... have replaced youth as a metaphor for social change ... [and] are now recognised as one of the stakes upon which the future depends’ (p. 200-1). Thus, there is a new intense cultural fascination with girls growing up “right” to ensure their success and thus the prevailing of late modernity (Harris 2004, p. 15). These discourses glaze over the persisting and potentially increasing inequalities produced by class and race stratifications in current times.

Young women (middle-class white women especially) are positioned as most able and likely to succeed in a late modern society (Harris 2004). This is made evident through portrayals of young, sassy and ‘empowered’ girls prevalent in western popular culture (McRobbie 2004a). The 1990s marked the point when the concept of popular feminism developed widespread expression in magazines and music culture. This gave rise to the post-feminist discourse in
which women are perceived to have achieved ‘empowerment’ (McRobbie 2004a). As highlighted by Gonick, the ubiquity of ‘girl-power’ is partly attributed to a cultural climate of ‘compulsory success’, providing ‘an image of the ideal feminine subject demanded by neoliberalism’ (Gonick 2006, p.11). Walkerdine and Ringrose (2006, p. 37) argue that the ‘post-feminist fantasy’ of ‘having it all’ is an undeniable middle-class ideal of femininity that is expressed through the continued pathologisation of ‘other’ women. However, these exclusions are considerably more challenging to critique due to the conception of people as individuals, thus underplaying structural problems of race, class and sexism. The following

figure 1 captures the contradictory messages used in contemporary marketing techniques – advertising the new ‘empowered’ glamorous, professional woman, while simultaneously reinforcing traditional gender roles and standards of feminine beauty.

*Figure 1:* Controversial pen advertisement for women (Bic South Africa 2015)

In their 2007 Australian study, O’Flynn and Peterson suggest that schools are core agents in:
“providing students with repertoires through which they can make sense of themselves, what they do, and why they do it – by the way a school constitutes its priorities, how the teachers speak and act, how a school conceptualises and foregrounds certain practices and relegates others, and how it constitutes its infrastructure and policies” (O’Flynn and Peterson 2007, p. 461).

Variation in the ways that different schools help to make students ‘proficient’ (or not so ‘proficient’), individualistic, entrepreneurial subjects contributes to the variation in ways students become future citizens of neoliberal economies (O’Flynn and Peterson 2007, p.461). This thesis contributes to a body of literature which posits that far-reaching proliferation of individualistic values has occurred in conjunction with the rise of neoliberal policy-making, dialectically producing a ripple-on effect from institutions to individuals, whereby changes in the requirements of the labour market and influence changes in individual’s life pathways. In Australia, this has been characterised by ‘financial recession, higher unemployment, flexibilisation of the workplace, a need for further education, and changes in family and social relationships’ (Cuervo & Wyn 2012, p. 31).

Subsequently, individualistic, value-driven principles are taken for granted as an appropriate way of making sense of oneself and others and what constitutes as ‘successful womanhood’. Differential access to types of cultural, economic, and symbolic capital relevant to the shifting demands of the neoliberal labour market may position students significantly differently in terms of future prospects and work-life scenarios (O’Flynn & Peterson 2007). Elite private girl’s schools provide a crucial site to examine how the forces of post-feminism, individualism, and late capitalism, influence and are enacted through the gendered habitus of students as social agents.
Chapter Two: Womanhood in practice: Situating social theory

Having introduced the research project and situated it within its contemporary and historical context, this section serves to build up the theoretical foundations of the study. Womanhood is a social practice that simultaneously structures and is structured by individuals through a process of continuous negotiation, resistance and re-articulation. By examining young women’s experiences through the lens of practice, it is possible to disentangle individuals’ routinized social action and the role that schooling institutions play in shaping and reconstituting the formation of “successful womanhood”. In the context of the schooling institution, a critical site of social reproduction, it is possible to challenge taken-for-granted aspects of gender socialisation that continue to shape girls’ lives. Firstly, I introduce the core elements of relevant feminist theory and Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice. Additionally, I apply these to the elite girls’ schooling context and expand on the critical feminist concepts that underpin this thesis.

Conceptualising young femininities

The Schizoid double-pull

Through a practice approach, this thesis recognises the dialectical interplay between structural forces and individuals as social agents. When examined from a situated stance, the schizoid double-pull helps to show the increasing ambivalences and contradictions that constitute womanhood, making visible the multiplicity of gendered binaries that make up the complex anti-linear process of becoming a woman.
From the realm of gender and critical theory, French feminist philosopher, Rosi Braidotti, introduces the Deleuzian-inspired (see Deleuze & Guattari 1983; 1987) concept of the ‘schizoid double-pull’ in her (2006) book, *Transpositions*. Braidotti explores the ways gender norms are increasingly ‘difficult to read’ in late capitalist societies (Braidotti 2006, p. 49). Through this notion Braidotti describes how ‘gender and sexual norms are both displaced (deterritorialized) and refixed (reterritorialized)’ (Renold & Ringrose 2011, p. 393). This notion, however, is used within a larger conceptual framework that addresses the ways globalization functions to commodify Otherness (difference). The schizoid double-pull is thereby linked to advanced capitalism and its globalised economy, which she describes as, ‘a machine that spins off and multiplies differences for the sake of their commodification and profit’ (Braidotti 2006, p. 171). Braidotti asserts that,

> [The current socio-economic climate] engenders, propels and contains simultaneously opposite effects: degrees of gender equality with growing segregation of the sexes; gender trouble on the one hand and polarized sexual difference on the other (Braidotti 2006, p. 92).

For instance, Renold and Ringrose (2011) explore Braidotti’s theorisation in relation to the popular children’s ‘Bratz’ doll, not dissimilar to the Barbie dolls depicted in *figure 2* on the following page. With these dolls, girls can invest in culturally “diverse” femininities, so long as they project ‘coherent intelligible (hetero)sexualised femininities’ (Renold & Ringrose 2011, p. 70).
This materialist approach is a useful model to illuminate the link between the polarising characteristics of femininity and the capitalist economy, however, it limits the extent to which one can grapple with the topic without becoming deterministic. Further, Braidotti’s structuralist epistemological presuppositions and pathologisation in her diagnosis of ‘capitalism as schizophrenia’ (Braidotti 2006, p. 59), pays little attention to the role that young women’s agency plays in the construction of womanhood. Nonetheless, her conceptualisation of the schizoid double-pull is useful (if provocative) in showing the push-pull tensions of binary oppositions as ‘one of the most problematic aspects of contemporary political culture’ in relation to gender (Braidotti 2006, p. 49).

**Can-do, All-rounder, and Other girls**

The notion of the can-do girl is essential to conceptualising idealised formations of womanhood in the elite girls’ schooling context. Centred on young women’s agentic disposition, the concept is founded on the ideal disposition of the dominant group: white
middle-class, young women. This functions to ‘other’ those unable to meet such standards that are largely determined by cultural and economic capital. Current individualising conditions place added emphasis on how young women display the markers of taste and disposition of the can-do girl: sassy, independent and self-motivated.

Anita Harris’s 2004 book, *Future Girl*, introduces the concept of ‘can-do’ girls. Harris asserts that:

Power, opportunities and success are all modelled by the [can-do girl] – a kind of young woman celebrated for her desire, determination and confidence to take charge of her life, seize chances, and achieve her goals (Harris 2004, p. 1).

In conjunction with can-do girls is another type of young female identity; those who are deemed ‘at-risk’ or ‘Other’ (Harris 2004). ‘Other’ girls who do not or will not embody success-oriented behaviour have been subject to broad moral concern about antisocial attitudes and what Schneider and Stevenson call ‘misaligned ambitions’ (Schneider & Stevenson 1999, p. 157). Academic achievement has become paramount towards assuring prospects of young women in particular (Harris 2004). In this thesis, I reconceptualise the ‘can-do girl’ as the ‘all-rounder girl’. Specific to the context of elite all-girls schooling, an ‘all-rounder’ girl exhibits can-do qualities such as agency and determination to excel in a wide range of disciplines. The all-rounder ideal embodies adaptive abilities to perform and contribute. These traits are linked to labour demands of the late capitalist economy, characterised by job instability and required credentials (Brown et al. 1997, p. 7). As noted by O’Flynn and Peterson (2007, p. 468), the impact of late modern marketization is seen in common school rhetoric of ‘developing skills’ and ‘adding value’ to students. Marketization operates by turning everything into a marketable product and conceptualising all activity in
terms of adding or subtracting value (O’Flynn & Peterson 2007). The all-rounder girl helps to encapsulate the meritocratic nature of the current Western liberal school system within the elite girls’ schooling context, defining ‘successful womanhood’ in individualistic value-driven terms.

The conceptualisation of ‘can-do’ versus ‘at-risk’ girls helps to illuminate the polarizing conditions of contemporary womanhood, where if a young woman fails to fit the rigid dimensions of success as an ‘all-rounder’, she is positioned as an outsider or ‘at risk’ of failure. This conceptualisation of ‘risk’ is chiefly drawn from Harris (2004), though is grounded by Beck’s ‘Risk Society’ theory, whereby modern society is systematically arranged in response to hazards and insecurities (Beck 1992, p. 21). Preoccupation with how to succeed in a risk society has contributed to the embedding of the success-failure binary that is now central to the construction of contemporary womanhood (Harris 2004).

While the threat of being ‘at-risk’ is evidenced as ever-present for these young women, Harris’s classification is chiefly linked to pathologised or vulnerable social groupings and thus has little application in this study, which focuses on the ways those best positioned in society rearticulate feminine ideals. All participants have been heavily invested in to ensure they do not deviate from their success trajectories and have accordingly, all gone on to pursue higher education. Despite appearances, the data suggests that while girls perform the all-rounder/can-do ideal to some extent – their identity formation is far from unitary. Rather, their gendered habitus is formed across multiple contradictory social fields. Participants describe alternate ways of “doing girl” and “doing school” - no doubt a privilege afforded to them through their cultural and economic capital. Drawing on Bourdieu’s notion of ‘divided habitus’ and Bauman’s concept of ‘ambivalence’, I conceptualise this insider-outsider social positioning as ambivalent identity formation.
Bourdieusian Practice

The thesis chiefly draws its conceptual foundations from the works of French sociologist and philosopher, Pierre Bourdieu, known for leaving ‘an indelible mark on the field of educational and cultural sociology’ (Ozbilgin & Tatli 2005, p. 855). Bourdieu’s influential work on education with Jean-Claude Passeron (1990) propelled the claim that ‘social reproduction is realised through cultural reproduction in the schooling system’ (Werfhorst 2010, p. 157). Individuals administering, teaching and studying in schools are ‘simultaneously involved in both universalistic and particularistic practices,’ (Lynch 1988, p. 151). By hyphenating the word “re-production”, the “regulated improvisation” (Bourdieu 1977) or structured agency is highlighted in the everyday mundane lives of schools.

Recently, there has been a renewed interest in Bourdieu’s theorizing in youth and gender studies as well as in broader sociological thought (Ball et al. 2005; Rimmer 2005; Krais 2006). Bourdieu’s sophisticated theoretical foundations have facilitated productive class analysis, in which the complex relationship between structure and agency is foregrounded (Threadgold & Nilan 2009, p. 52). However, Bourdieu has received criticism for failing to recognise the significance of factors other than class that distinguish people from one another (Hall 1992). Indeed, many of Bourdieu’s works indicate that gender is a secondary characteristic to social class (Dumais 2002, p. 45). Further, Bourdieu’s use of Grand Theory (see Reckwitz 2003), while designed to reconcile the dualism of structuralism (structure) and constructivism (agency), leans somewhat too heavily into abstraction – which has proved difficult to operationalise through empirical research (Werfhorst 2010). These limitations can be overcome through ‘domesticated’ versions of Bourdieu’s theory via specialised research designs derived from his work (Goldthorpe 2007). One must recognise, however, that
Bourdieu’s core concepts cannot be viewed in isolation, given that his theory of practice is not a self-contained cohesive theory; rather, it represents a flexible theoretical approach in which the core elements work together to create social action (practice) (Walther 2014, p. 8). With these considerations in mind, the concepts of habitus, social field, and capital, are selectively operationalised in conjunction with gender and education. While Bourdieuan social theory has largely been dismissed in feminist debate, sociologists such as Beate Krais (2006), argue that his theoretical framework – particularly his notions of habitus and embodiment, can be effectively deployed in gender theory, as this thesis will show.

The social field

Field is the setting in which social action takes place, defined as ‘a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, p. 97). In relation to the schooling social field this may refer to ‘parent and child in a family; parent and teacher in a school; child and teacher in a school’ (Mickelson 2003, p. 374). These spaces delineate the distribution of certain types of resources (or capital) that dominant and subordinate groups struggle to gain control over (McNay 1999). In fields of education or paid work, access to capital is hierarchically assembled, restricting potential for success (Dumais 2002). A field’s existence nonetheless relies on the extent to which entering ‘players’ believe in, and actively pursue the rewards it offers (Wacquant 1992, p. 19). More broadly, social fields are domains of power, including those of economics, politics, education and culture, all of which are subject to the demands of the global capitalist system of accumulation (McNay 1999). Yet each field remains autonomous through their own internal logic or ‘collective unconscious,’ which operate to create and maintain taken-for-granted guidelines that limit the actions of agents (Turner 2013, p. 601).
The autonomous nature of a field creates disparate, non-synchronous relations with other fields and renders them ‘irreducible to any overarching dynamics’ (McNay 1999, p. 106).

Bourdieu claims that when power is paralleled by a complex set of relations between different fields, social control becomes more insidious and thus more effective. Simultaneously, this increase in the effectiveness of symbolic domination is countered by an increase in ‘the potential for subversive misappropriation’ arising from movement and conflict between fields of action (Bourdieu 1989, p. 390-2). Bourdieu provides limited consideration of gender identity, however, and does so without engagement with the concept of the field. Notably, he undervalues the ambiguities and dissonances that exist in the ways men and women inhabit masculine and feminine positions (McNay 1999). As McNay (1999, p. 107) points out, Bourdieu provides no recognition that ‘apparent complicity can conceal potential dislocation or alienation on the part of individuals’. This resonates in the former-student self-narratives presented below, in which girls are complicit yet critical of their schooling ethos.

An individual’s belonging within a field is dependent on their practical mastery of its particular laws and customs, rendered possible through their habitus, dispositions and schemas (Bourdieu 1993, p. 96). Bourdieu identifies customary rules, doxa, and ‘rules of the game’ as central components necessary to succeed in a given field. Doxa, an ancient Greek term that translates as ‘to appear’ or ‘to think’, is used here to describe the entirety of taken-for-granted thoughts, actions and decisions of social practice within a field. Doxa is created and reinforced through symbolic power – a subtle form of domination strengthened through the power of misrecognition – that is, agents’ failure to scrutinize their constructed reality and its limitations. Customary rules are implicit principles that agents adopt through learned ignorance, which is stronger the earlier an agent enters the field and results in unquestioning
conformity to such rules (Bourdieu 1990, p. 67). ‘Rules of the game’ draws a parallel between performance in the social field and the sporting field. Players learn the basic ‘rules’ to participate, such as types of capital and taken-for-granted principles, then employ ‘strategies’ to improve gameplay, operationalised through habitus and dispositions. The more competent the player, the more ‘forgotten’ the rules of the game become, hence know-how is embodied and internalised in agents’ habitus, prompting an interest to obey the rules by ‘being in the right’ (Bourdieu 1998, p. 22).

**Capital**

Capital (social, cultural, economic, emotional, symbolic) represents ‘the different goods, resources, and values around which power relations in a particular field crystalize’ (McNay 1999, p. 105). It is through capital that a field is actualised, internalised and subsequently reproduced. Among individuals, the class-based distribution of social, economic and cultural capital is instrumental in determining ‘the chances of success for practices’ within a social field (Bourdieu 1986, p. 242).

Depending on the field in which it functions, capital can present itself in three fundamental forms: as *economic capital*, which is instantly and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights; as *cultural capital*, which is convertible, in particular conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications; and as *social capital*, comprised of social obligations (‘connections’), which is convertible, in particular conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of a title of nobility (Bourdieu 1986, p. 47).

Education is a critical field due to its capacity to impart capital, particularly cultural capital, in its participants. Cultural capital consists of resources such as linguistic ability, general
cultural competence, aesthetic preferences, information and educational credentials (Swartz 1997, p. 75), as well as intangible nuances of style. Cultural capital enables success in fields of education, lifestyle and ‘taste’; however, general cultural awareness is acquired for instance, through exposure to theatre or art galleries, which rarely extends to the lower classes. Of all Bourdieu’s concepts, cultural capital has become the most used and examined by sociologists of education (Dumais 2002). In order for a student to acquire cultural capital, they must possess the ability to receive and internalise it. While schools require that students have this ability, they do not deliver it to them, or rather, as educational social theorist, Susan Dumais notes, ‘the acquisition of cultural capital and consequent access to academic rewards is dependent upon the cultural capital passed down through family, which is largely dependent on social class’ (Dumais 2002, p. 44). Thus, the educational system is geared for and benefits middle-upper class students, like those within this study, more so than any other.

**Habitus and embodiment**

Central to a feminist approach to practice, habitus and embodiment help to illuminate the ways in which becoming a woman is negotiated and never fixed: the habitus is ‘the medium through which ‘doing gender’ takes place’ (Krais 2006, p. 128). It guides one’s ‘feel for the game’ or ‘practical sense’ (Bourdieu 1993, p. 5) and comprises of largely unconscious decision-making principles and dispositions that generate and organize practice, ‘enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations’ (Bourdieu 1998, p. 72). In short, habitus is a set of dispositions that form a matrix of realistic actions or choices in which one may engage in particular situations (Threadgold & Nilan 2009, p. 53). Due to the internalization of external structures, habitus responds to the solicitation of the field ‘in a roughly coherent and systematic manner’ (Wacquant 1992, p. 18). Thus, habitus loosely constitutes ‘the parameters of social and cultural understandings and practices within
socioeconomic groups, including those pertaining to choices and expectations of the future –
ambitions and obstacles’ (Threadgold & Nilan 2009, p. 53).

As previously discussed, the schooling institution is widely viewed by sociologists as an
essential site of social reproduction. Central to Bourdieu’s (1984, p. 466) conceptualisation of
social reproduction are ways habitus imbues ‘a sense of one’s place’. This can manifest in
individuals as unwillingness to seek cultural experiences or employment outside of what is
‘normalised’ for their specific habitus, excluding themselves from what they are often already
excluded from because ‘that’s not for the likes of us’ (Bourdieu 1984, p. 471). This theory is
useful towards understanding the ways young women actively perpetuate traditional gender
norms in-school and how their unconscious actions and conscious decisions are informed
after school.

**Gendered Habitus**

It is through the habitus that the symbolic order of gender classification is generated into
social practice. This operates through the incessant dichotomizing of male/female, which in
turn mobilizes schemata that help form the symbolic order (Krais 2006, p. 121). Bourdieu
emphasizes how the symbolic order of gender constructs the body as a biological reality that
can be categorized into social formations of male and female, which shape and define the
body, its habits, forms of expression, how it is perceived, and thus the individual’s identity –
via the body – as masculine or feminine, posing as part of the ‘natural’ order of the world.
(Krais 2006, p. 121). Unlike other social structures, this process of naturalisation makes it
easy to forget that the gender dichotomy is produced and re-produced solely by humans. As
Elizabeth Grosz (1994a) notes, the body is a ‘transitional entity’, whereby one’s psychical
exterior and corporeal interior are constitutive yet not reducible to the other. This lack of
finality suggests that the ascription of feminine corporeal identity is never straightforward or
complete (McNay 1999, p. 98). It is this indeterminacy that frees space for the construction of fluid gendered identities, whereby the embodied subject is formed through dominant norms but is not reducible to them (McNay 1999).

**Embodiment**

The concept of embodiment is central to feminist thought because it links elements of determinism and voluntarism through positioning a mutual significance of body and mind in place of Cartesian dualism (McNay 1999, p. 98). Embodiment is expressed in Judith Butler’s (1990; 1993) concept of performativity. Butler describes how continually reiterated cultural gender norms are deeply inscribed into our bodies. Yet, simultaneously the cultural necessity for performative reiteration indicates a fundamental instability in gendered identity. Thus, gender can be understood as fluid in the sense that it is an embedded though not unsurpassable boundary (McNay 1999, p. 99).

When discussing the embodiment of gendered practice, it is important to acknowledge the indivisibility of sexuality and gender in constituting people’s bodily experience. A wealth of feminist literature denotes the relationships between sex, gender and sexuality, and the schooling experience (Allen 2007). Butler’s works, in particular, have been significant in establishing this connection. Drawing on Foucauldian understandings of subjectivation, her theorization of the inseparability of gender and sexuality in contemporary discursive frames, shows how student’s mundane day-to-day practices contribute to the embodiment of their gendered identities. These embodied practices include, ‘bodily deportment, physical games, linguistic accounts, and uses of clothing, hairstyles and accessories’ (Youdell 2005, p. 249). The naturalization of heterosexuality within the school site continues to play a significant structuring role within student sexual cultures. However, schools have a vested interest in constructing students as non-sexual, in accordance with the dominant perception of schooling
as a purely academic enterprise (Allen 2007). These contradictory discourses pose added tensions on young women’s sexual and gendered expression.

Bourdieu’s notion of embodiment via the habitus is used here help illuminate the ways that the elite girls’ schooling social field informs girls’ bodily practices and hence the construction of young women’s gendered and sexual identities. Habitus and the field are useful due to their encapsulation of social spaces and the significance of aesthetics and taste as markers of class distinction. However, Bourdieu’s work on gendered habitus arguably fails to wholly integrate into his work on the concept of the field. McNay (1999, p. 96) asserts that the field can, in fact, enable the conceptualisation of differentiation within the construction of gender identity. Bourdieu’s concept of embodiment, McNay (1999) posits, is crucial to bridging his theoretical framework with feminist thought, and through embodiment we can see how a school’s social aesthetics and everyday mundane practices can have real lived implications for students, teachers, and the broader community.

**Divided Habitus and Ambivalence**

Recent studies on masculinities have demonstrated that with dominant forms of subjectivity, the habitus cannot always form unproblematic alignment between the demands of the field and subjective dispositions. Kaja Silverman’s (1992) study asserts that the dominant ‘conception of masculinity is an idealised fiction and is, therefore, a position that cannot be filled within the social realm’ (cited in McNay 1999, p. 108). Likewise, Lacan argued that the notion of the feminine is ‘unfillable because of its negative relation to the symbolic, so the masculine, as the epicentre of meaning in a phallocentric system, is also illusory’ (cited in McNay 1999, p. 108). While gender theorists have been effective in reconfiguring Bourdieusian concepts to address the instability of gender identity, Bourdieu himself did not
seem to register that ‘masculine and feminine identities are not unified configurations but a
series of uneasily sutured, potentially conflictual subject positions’ (McNay 1999, p. 105).
Thus by failing to account for the field in relation to gender identity, Bourdieu did not
demonstrate a conception of multiple subjectivities (Moore 1994, p. 80). Nonetheless,
Bourdieu makes reference to the idea of ‘divided habitus’ and through this concept, it is
possible to bridge notions of ambivalence and multiple schizoid subjectivities with his
theoretical framework.

The notion of ‘divided habitus’ is drawn from Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of habitus as
constructed through multiple social fields, which splits one’s habitus and engenders degrees
of ambivalence. As Bourdieu himself posits, habitus as the interiorisation of social history is
fundamentally about the degree of integration across the disparate experiences that make up a
biography (Bourdieu 1990). Indeed, Bourdieu describes his own “split habitus” through his
ascension from the working-class social conditions of his childhood to – via the educational
system – becoming considered a part of the French elite. To this split habitus, he attributes his
critical view of French societal structures and mechanisms of domination (Krais 2006, p.
130). I build on this notion in application of ambivalence identity formation in the schizoid
conditions of late modernity, drawing on key theorists, Zygmunt Bauman and Marnina
Gonick, to explore the dynamics of ambivalence as an expression of the uncertainties that
characterise social conditions.

Bauman (1991) points out that no binary classification in the construction of order (such as
the all-rounder girl) can completely overlap with an individual’s continuous experience of
reality. Consequently, Bauman (1991, p. 61) suggests:
The enforcement of any classification inevitably means the production of anomalies (that is, phenomena which are perceived as ‘anomalous’ only as far as they span the categories whose staying a part is the meaning of order).

Bauman defines ambivalence in relation to those considered as ‘undecidables’: given agency through ‘undetermination’, their positioning both inside and outside oppositions reveals the fragility of these separations, the fallibility of order, and the vulnerability of the inside (Bauman 1991, p. 56, 74). This thesis suggests that the embodiment of ambivalence is on the rise in current times, not only for those on the social outskirts of dominant culture (as Bauman devised), but even for those within. Bauman (1991) notes the emergence of this shift at the turn of the 1990s:

Once declared to be a mortal danger to all social and political order, ambivalence is not ‘an enemy at the gate’ anymore. On the contrary: like everything else, it has been made into one of the stage props in the play called post-[liquid]-modernity (p. 231).

Taking a structuralist standpoint, Bauman notes the multiplicity of liquid (interchangeable with late) modern conditions that convolute binary oppositions, wherein individuals must negotiate mutually autonomous social fields, ‘fraught with contradictory messages, pressures pointing in opposite directions, and needs which cannot be satisfied without sacrificing or endangering other needs’ (Bauman 1991, p. 225). This notion is expanded through a feminist lens by Marnina Gonick (2003), exploring the capacity to tolerate and encourage fluid and multiple forms of subjectivity as a new discursive space for young women to enter as social agents. The interest in how these spaces might operate to destabilize binary oppositions is juxtaposed with anxiety in how they may also be fraught with difficulties and contradictions’ (Gonick 2003, p. 207). These competing demands, Gonick argues, are constitutive of the changing modes of femininity.
Recently, a number of scholars working within postmodern, postcolonial, and critical race theory (see Ahmed 1999; Ang 1996; Bauman 1991; Bhabha 1990; Trinh 1991), have discussed the notion of ambivalence as a type of ‘political force’ of sorts (Gonick 2004, p. 193). For instance, Bhabha (1990) introduces the idea of “the third space” to describe the liminality of ambivalence. It is through this third space, Bhabha posits, that one may transcend the grid of binary oppositions and fixed identities through production of hybrid cultural formations, emphasizing the ways it ‘displaces the histories that constitute it’ (Bhabha 1990, p. 12). As Trinh (1991, p. 74) also asserts, it is through this liminal “in-betweeness” that one can be ‘both a deceptive insider and a deceptive outsider’ disrupting definitions of Otherness.

While ambivalence may well operate as a powerful form of subversion, scholars including Ang (1996), McClintock (1995), and Gonick (2004), point out that there is a tendency to overstate and romanticise the effectiveness of ambivalence as a discursive and desirable force. McClintock (1995, p. 45) suggests that ambivalence may not, in itself, be enough to displace authority. Indeed, in the current context of fluidity and marketing through difference, the disruption of social norms is not always subversive (Gonick 2004; Braidotti 2006). Moreover, as previously mentioned, privileged groups may display their privilege precisely through extravagant shows of their right to ambiguity (McClintock 1995, p. 68). The notion of ambivalence thus has particular relevance in the elite girls’ schooling context. Accordingly, it is necessary to avoid the assumption that ambivalence is inherently subversive and instead, explore ambivalence through the ways in which specific forms of ambiguity are expressed (McClintock 1995, p. 63).
While Bourdiesian practice has been largely underutilised theoretical framework in feminist studies, by locating key terms in congruence with relevant feminist and late modern literature, analysis into the dialectics of structure and agency is enriched - particularly within the schooling institution, which play such a significant role in social re-production.

The messy realities of young women’s lived experience in elite girls’ schooling cannot be divisible to dualistic notions of structure and agency. By employing a ‘domesticated’ approach to Bourdieusian practice through a situated feminist lens, this thesis accounts for the indeterminacy of gendered (and sexed) identities. As Deeds-Ermath (2001) argues, we need to move away from simplistic representations of institutions and social agents as limited to ‘either/or’ towards understandings that facilitate a capacity for ‘both/and’ (Deeds-Ermath 2001, p. 44). To think about “structured agency” is to think about human experience as simultaneously reinforcing the old and constructing something new out of the cultural schemas and restricted frameworks that form an individual’s thoughts and actions (Forsey 2006). The notion of ambivalence offers a way to characterise the increasing incongruities of late modernity that young women are negotiating across multiple social fields.
Figure 3 below helps to illustrate the dialectical relationships between the above Bourdieusian concepts, as well as the circular relationship between structure and habitus that acts as structured structures (opus operatum) and structuring structures (modus operandi) simultaneously (Walther 2014, p. 16).

Figure 3: The interplay of field, capital and habitus (Walther 2014, p. 16)
Chapter Three:

Ideal Representations:

An image analysis of elite, Australian girls’ schools

Figure 4: Photograph I took, with permission, of signage at one local elite, girls’ school

(18th August 2017)

More than a Motto

The promotional materials of elite single-sex schools were one of the initial hooks that drew me into my study of elite girls’ schooling and idealised womanhood. On my drive to and from university, I was struck by the billboards and slogans that advertised some of the most prestigious schools of the state, like symbolic beacons of gendered ideals marking the length of my journey. On my route, I drive directly past one elite girls’ school and one elite boys’ school. The distinction in their advertising imagery and language is always a stark reminder of how gender norms are differentially produced in all-boys and all-girls schools, contributing to a broader discussion about gender and schooling. The boy’s school slogan written in bold across the school’s foremost building states, ‘Building Good Men’, while the slogan written on the girls’ school building states, ‘Find a World of Purpose’. The use of pointedly gendered and ungendered language in these contrasting school slogans
demonstrates how educational discourse can reiterate and resist idealised versions of masculinity and femininity (Wardman et al. 2010). What do such differing signs signify about the image management of these schools and how they wish to appeal to potential clientele? A semiotic comparison between elite girls’ and boys’ schools would undoubtedly produce fruitful insights into how hegemonic masculinity and femininity is re-presented and re-produced in these schooling contexts as argued elsewhere (Wardman et al. 2010; Gottschall et al. 2010); however, this chapter is primarily concerned with how elite girls’ schools across Australia represent womanhood through visual promotional materials.

Perhaps what I find most fascinating about the above slogans, aside from the unapologetic masculine language used by the boys’ school, is how through a vague and ungendered manner, the girls’ school slogan is effectively re-packaging traditional heteronormative ideologies. This is evident in the narrative of searching for an unknown, albeit desirable future, as seen in the below photograph I took of a recent advertisement of one local elite, girls’ school. Such motifs are not uncommon in elite girls’ school mottos, constructing women as committed to a personal and often challenging endeavour to climb to lofty, romantic heights (Wardman et al. 2010, p. 255). This pursuit implies a purpose already ordained in terms of responsibility and service (appropriate to feminine subjectivity) (Reay 2001). These representations re-produce discourses of femininity, in which the idealised female student with ‘purpose’ can simultaneously be empowered, yet serve others, summoning romantic and hyper-feminine (passive and pure) imagery (Charles 2010).
Figure 5: Photograph I took of bus-stop advertisement for one local elite, private girls’ school (13th March 2019)

Such underlying conflictual messages of womanhood are one of the primary concerns of this thesis, which argues that normative schooling aesthetics play a significant role in the systemic institutionalisation of traditional gender norms. The following chapter reports findings of a systematic study into the forms and styles in representation of idealised womanhood evident in the websites of elite independent girls’ schools across Australia, examining the visual promotional materials of the top ranked independent girls’ schools in each of the Australian states. I based my selection process on data obtained through the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) conducted by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) (see myschool.edu.au). By exploring these public representations, this chapter functions to set the scene: using a broader lens to complement the specific lived-experiences of recent graduates of the elite, private girls’ schooling contexts in Western Australia.
Drawing on forms of sensory ethnography through a feminist lens, these elite school websites are viewed as a form of Bourdieusian practice, with their emphasis on individualistic values, ‘girl power’, and the subversion of traditionally masculine disciplines such as sports and science, as indicative of broader cultural shifts in Western values. Given the significance of aesthetics in today’s image-focused world, digital visual methods, when used as part of a research process, can help to illuminate aspects of the schooling experience that are often sensory and invisible (Pink 2013). While there is already vast and growing literature about internet ethnography, further attention to reflexive visual research methods is needed in ethnography and education. I acknowledge the limitations of only using photographs to depict the wider ethos of elite girls’ schooling. However, given the pervasiveness of the visual in today’s world, there is justification in privileging aesthetics (in the form of photographs and accompanying text) in this collection (Fahey et al. 2015, p. 14).

Websites are an important aspect of differentiation for schools, creating a means of impression management and market positioning that, while vital to the ongoing viability of all educational institutions, are arguably most significant for elite schools (Symes 1998; Wilkins 2012; Drew 2013). The findings of this image analysis suggest that while the school advertisements appear progressive in their message they tend to recirculate traditional gender messages in new ways. The contradictory signifiers evident in these webpages are representative of the schizoid tensions (Renold & Ringrose 2011) within contemporary womanhood, entrenched in upper-middle class ‘whiteness’, that as previously noted, are ‘setting the standard’ for other schools and broader society.

Previous studies (see Gottschall et al. 2010; MacDougall 1999) show how school promotional materials and prospectuses are sites for the construction of idealised students,
and of gendered, racial and class fantasies perpetuated in normative discourses of schooling (though the focus of this thesis is chiefly on gender representations) (Wardman et al. 2010, p. 250). These studies have identified how students’ gender identities are regulated as a means of producing children with desirable heteronormative attributes (Gottschall et al. 2010; Wardman et al. 2010). While such image management strategies are employed to position the schools as attractive institutions, they simultaneously re-present images of independent elite schooling as a superior model of education, ‘privileging exclusivity and [classed] gender norms as images of educational success’ (Wardman et al. 2010, p. 177). In-so-doing, dominant ideal standards of womanhood and neoliberal educational “excellence” are actively shaped by the image management of elite schools and thus require further attention in education studies.

This chapter draws on David MacDougall’s (1999) seminal visual anthropological work and artful filming of the Indian elite boys’ school of Doon. In this work, MacDougall (1999, p. 3) argues that while aesthetic considerations appear to play a role in all communities, it is of particular pertinence in small “constructed” communities like schools, where the social aesthetic field appears more systematically ordered. MacDougall (1999, p. 5) suggests that the sociological significance of social aesthetics is the extent to which these aesthetic patterns can affect events and decisions in a community, as well as other more commonly documented social forces like politics, history, economics and ideologies. This notion of pervasive aesthetic patterns and their influence on the dispositions and decisions of a community has distinctive Bourdieuan presuppositions. MacDougall’s application of the social aesthetic field demonstrates how Bourdieu’s practice theory can be used in social aesthetics to reveal underlying cultural codes that shape (and are shaped by) actors within their social field.
MacDougall draws on Bourdieu (1990) in his conceptualisation of the social aesthetic field: comprised of objects and actions that can be viewed as a physical manifestation of the predominantly unseen and internalised “embodied history” of the habitus (Bourdieu 1990, p. 56). While Bourdieu does not explicitly refer to habitus in physical terms, he speaks metaphorically of the “physiognomy” of a “social environment” (Bourdieu 1990, p. 60). MacDougall reimagines physiognomy in more tangible terms, stating that it is not an attribute of the self but ‘exists all around us concretely, in the disposition of time, space, objects, and social activities’ (MacDougall 1999, p. 6). Physiognomy encompasses the very domains of practice that Bourdieu himself discusses in his research among the Kabyle of North Africa, in which, he refers to the often-overlooked structure and orientation of time and space, as well as the rituals that value colour, the body, and the sexual division of labour (Bourdieu 1990, p. 9). MacDougall states that whatever specific local form the variants of physiognomy take, its effect is to delineate a recognizable social space and the individual’s sense of belonging, ‘like a lock and its key’ (MacDougall 1999, p. 6). MacDougall’s lens of Bourdieuan physiognomy is useful to consider the social significance of the following promotional materials.

In the images and accompanying texts of the girls’ school materials, we see some of the schizoid tensions of femininity at play, including ‘traditional-versus-progressive’, ‘brains-versus-beauty’, and ‘sporty-versus-girly’. Many characteristics of normative femininity and the post-feminist context are explored here, through analysing the ways that elite girls’ schools across Australia portray neoliberal and post-feminist values through their image of the ideal all-rounder girl. However, it is important to consider the ways our discernment of these schools are guided by cultural, intellectual and personal interests (MacDougall 2006, p. 2). Prior to exploring these images, it is beneficial to review elite education, as well as the epistemological and methodological foundations of this study.
“Elite” Schooling and Aesthetics

Previous studies (Fahey et al. 2015; Symes 1998; MacDougall 1999) argue the importance of aesthetics in reaffirming a school’s elite status. Due to the ubiquity of ‘elite’ aesthetics, schools place emphasis on certain themes as a means of distinguishing themselves (Wilkins 2012). This thesis draws its definition of “eliteness” from Fahey, Prosser & Shaw (2015), in their analysis of the aesthetics of privilege across multiple elite schooling contexts. While there is no set definition of what makes a school ‘elite’, common attributes include:

1. **Academic Excellence**
   
   Delivery of high academic standards and provision of well-resourced (from benefaction and fees), well-rounded, education is key to schools who enjoy greatest standing as ‘elite’ (Fahey et al. 2015, p. 3).

2. **Co-Curricular Activities**
   
   Co-curricular activities such as, sports, dance, and other activities, in addition to the standard academic curriculum, not only display the means of the school but also fall within the neoliberal imperative of diversified skills and qualifications that make up the ideal ‘can-do’ enterprising young woman (Harris 2004; Hey & Bradford 2007).

3. **Progressive yet Traditional**
   
   Emphasis on a middle ground between tradition and progressiveness; many schools honour their histories and traditions, yet in the interest of remaining relevant, they regularly reinvent themselves through displays of innovation linked to a notion of liberal progressiveness (Fahey et al. 2015).

4. **Image of Prestige**
   
   Maintaining an image of prestige is needed to appeal to affluent clientele, often by classic displays of wealth and respectability; the ability to exclude
undesirable clientele; and geographical elitism (promotion of architecture and expansive grounds as a signifier of wealth) (Symes 1998).

These contributing factors are shown in the following materials to be distinctly embedded within a particular gendered, white, and middle-class framing that plays a crucial part in the continuities and changes shaping young womanhood in this schooling context.

**Methodology**

The following data sample comprises of the promotional images produced by the top elite girls’ schools of six Australian states. Schools were selected with the highest socio-educational advantage per state, making their position as ‘elite’ is more justifiable. However, relative wealth from state to state should be considered as a point of difference and perhaps a limitation of this definition. Despite the slight deviation in ICSEA scores, the selection criteria remain the same: top ICSEA scorers of their state, independent, all-girls, and elite (highly funded).

The image collection was drawn from the landing page of the school websites with a handful of school slogans and text exerts to supplement visual data. Systematic image selection was facilitated by commonality in website architecture that displayed consistent use of promotional photo slideshows accompanied by slogans or quotes. The data was collected in May 2018 and given the ferocity of advertising among elite schools, these images are likely to have changed. In the interest of confidentiality, I have intentionally cropped images that bear the name of the school. All six schools share some significant commonalities that make them analogous to each other, providing a fruitful avenue of comparison. In the interest of conciseness, only the most representative images are reproduced in text.
This chapter employs the visual social semiotic analytics outlined by van Leeuwen (2005) and Fahey et al. (2015) to inform the image analysis. This consists of two levels of meaning: denotative meaning and connotative meaning. I will follow the conventions laid out in describing denotations first, followed by connotative analysis.

1. **Denotative meaning**

Denotative meaning (or the first layer of meaning) is derived from ‘the use of semiotic resources that refer to concrete people places, things, qualities and events’ (van Leeuwen 2005, p. 275). This entails, for instance, a direct correspondence between the object referred to and resource used (Fahey et al. 2015, p. 75). There are four key elements of denotative meaning in this analysis: the text (or linguistic meaning), the image (objects and place), the subject (or participants within the image), and the viewer (or who the image is aimed at).

2. **Connotative meaning**

Connotative meaning can be understood as the level in which ideological meaning is found. Connotative meaning (or the second layer of meaning superimposed on denotative meaning) is derived from ‘culturally shared associations which cling to the represented people, places and things, or through specific ‘connotators’ … ’ (van Leeuwen 2005, p. 38). Connotators are the specific styles and techniques that contribute to the ideological meanings of an image through enhancement of the visual object (van Leeuwen 2005, p. 39). Connotative meaning is often presented as a ‘given’ within the culture concerned, or the viewer may not have the culture-specific knowledge necessary (Fahey et al. 2015, p. 75).

The benefit of using semiotics as a methodological framework is its capacity to draw critical attention to the ideological representations of school aesthetics. However, van Leeuwen’s method of visual analysis only provides a descriptive framework (Jewitt & Oyama 2001, p.
Thus, it cannot on its own offer all that is necessary for the sociological interpretation of images and will be bolstered by a feminist anthropological approach.

The Elite Girl: Excellence, Individualism and Ethnicity

Figure 6: School A, ‘Elite girls’ screenshot taken from school website landing page (2nd May 2018).

Excellence

Figure 6 displays three students of mixed ethnicity (two of the few non-anglo students found in this data set) in crisp school uniforms, with brown hair smoothed and tied neatly in ponytails with some ribbon visible, and smiles that reveal straight, white teeth. The racial significations are obvious – speaking of the school’s mixed clientele. The three participants’ formal posturing indicates that the intention of the photograph was not to display a naturalistic real-life image but to showcase the students, like a school photo. This posturing paired with the linguistic text links the girls to academic accomplishments. Simultaneously, the traditional uniform, timber bench, and long hallway - featuring large lockers and pigeonholes, are all upper-middle-class signifiers that speak of spaciousness, comfort and superior facilities. Excellence is thus signified here through state-of-the-art facilities and pedagogy that, as the text captures, is proven to yield academic results.
This image is situated within and works to perpetuate a cultural climate that requires all young women to pursue almost impossibly high standards of excellence. As Holland (1998) suggests, such photos represent young women as educational success stories, positioning viewers as proud parents looking upon their children’s educational achievements. The accompanying text also signifies the ‘future oriented world of competition’ where these young women are positioned to succeed (Holland 1998, p. 87). This climate of rising credentials and competitiveness functions within a new regime of school choice that has increased focus on educational ‘excellence’ over ‘equity’ and ‘equality’ (Butler et al. 2017). This has fuelled a shift in focus of national governance ‘from citizenship and service towards clientship and consumerism’ (Forsey 2004, p. 286). The norm of excellence in these elite girls’ schools, Kenway (1990) argues, establishes intellectual superiority as an inherent trait of the student body.

Emphasis on academic excellence is seen across the data set, signifying the presence of broader societal pressures that construct taken-for-granted excellence as central to the production of a new young womanhood centred on ‘having it all’ (Harris 2004, p. 106). As Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody (2001, p. 179) suggest ‘it is difficult to overstate the way in which very high academic performance is routinely understood as ordinary and simply the level that is expected’ in these elite girls’ schools.

The immaculate uniforms are ‘signs of wealth’ signifying ‘cleverness, exclusivity and excellence’ and continuity with the past through ‘iconography of traditional schooling’ (Allan 2010, p. 40). Further signification of class distinction is the displaying of straight, white teeth (Khalid & Quiñonez 2015). Bourdieusian insights suggest that teeth are a component of physical capital, with the habitus being crucial in the production of class-specific dental aesthetic practices that determine how teeth are invested in (Khalid & Quiñonez 2015, p. 783). Given that most people are not naturally bestowed with perfect teeth, orthodontic
treatment and cosmetic procedures are prerequisites. These processes entail sizeable expenditure of time and money – resources that are not equally available to all social groups (Khalid & Quiñonez 2015, pp. 790-791). Cosmetic dentistry, Catherine Exley (2009) argues, is a new medium to examine broader sociological concerns with the individualised ‘body project’, evidenced through a marked shift in attitudes ‘from seeing oral health as purely functional, to one central to individual appearance’ (p. 1102). Indeed, an enhanced smile is not only linked to improved confidence and self-esteem, but may be positively correlated with employment opportunities (Singhal et al. 2013). Perfect smiles are shown here to be a form of value-addedness (O’Flynn & Petersen 2007) that parents invest in their daughters, as well as a bodily social aesthetic pattern of the elite schooling social field, crucial to an individual’s sense of belonging.

**Ethnicity**

It has been established that ‘whiteness’ is a distinctive trait of the traditional elite schooling aesthetic (Epstein 2014). *Figure 6* is one of few images in this data set that contains varied ethnicities, representing a shift in the overwhelming representation of white upper-middle class girls achieving the most, as a ‘super class of pupils who can supposedly effortlessly succeed in everything that they do’ (Allan 2010, p. 40, emphasis added). The minimal diversity in the overall data set, however, highlights the racial and classed exclusivity of elite girls’ schooling. Asian ethnicities are a noteworthy exception, which makes sense given that these schools are cognisant of catering for this demographic as competitors in the international education market (Kenway et al. 2015).

Displays of diversity are increasingly common in the current globalised schooling marketplace (Wilkins 2012). Many schools use calculated ‘multicultural’ images to perform the ideological-symbolic work of presenting themselves within a ‘utopian-global narrative’
(Wilkins 2012, p. 76). Rather than for purely tokenistic reasons, School A may well have selected students for the above image based on excellent academic performance, framing racialisation quite possibly secondary to liberal academic objectives. Drawing on Stuart Hall’s (1997) notion of the absence of signification, the ‘missing’ ethnic participants across much of this data set establishes whiteness as a dominant ideal representation of womanhood in elite girls’ schooling.

**Individualism**

![School B, ‘Difference’ screenshot taken from school website landing page (2nd May 2018).](image)

Viewing the whole image at surface level, it is worth noting that the photograph and overlayed text do not reference education at all. The linguistic message of ‘find your difference’ directly addresses students, a technique not commonly employed in the data set – at least, not so explicitly. This emphasis on the liberal imperatives of individualistic achievement and the project of self encourages students to take personal responsibility for their life trajectories, qualifications and achievements. The actual program advertised in the image is a one-year outdoors program for Year 9s, stating ‘Year 9 is Different’, which in
itself, is a radical initiative, demonstrating some significant changes in the desirable outcomes of girls’ schooling, one where outdoors(wo)manship is valued.

The connotators presented through the visual modality of the image reveal more about its semiotic function. Visual modality refers to the degree to which specific types of pictorial expression (colour, depth, focus, and tonal shades) are used (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996). Here we see black and white tonal composition, soft focus background and a close-up of a good-looking girl’s face. Obviously, beauty is subjective and culturally specific, however, numerous psychological studies denote common preferences of feminine facial attractiveness, including: symmetry, large eyes, and a small nose – all seen here (Thornhill & Gangestad 1999; Cunningham 1986). The participant is not in uniform and has her long (presumably) dark blonde hair is worn down. Her direct gaze shows her awareness of the viewer and the social proximity of the frame gives the viewer a sense of intimacy. These effects help to disassociate the image from the traditional uniformed and “proper” aesthetics often seen in elite girls’ schools’ promotional materials. Instead, it appeals to fashionable youth culture with an ‘arthouse’ effect. This effect has several layers of connotative meaning; firstly, it signifies the importance of uniqueness in the current competitive elite education market.

While most schools attempted to represent their eliteness through a balance of progressive and traditional values, this school has made no attempt to be perceived as traditional. By presenting itself as relevant and up-to-date with young people’s needs and interests, it is bolstering its elite reputation solely through representation of progressiveness, projecting that innovation is valued over tradition. Less evidently, is the gendered connotative meaning of

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3 The use of the term ‘good-looking’ is drawn from a psychological definition based on certain markers of attractiveness through responses of adult males to specific adult female facial features. These include the infantile features of large eyes and small nose; the maturity features of prominent cheekbones and narrow cheeks; and the expressive features of high eyebrows and a large smile; found positively correlated with attractiveness ratings (Cunningham 1986, p. 925). Many of these features are present here across the sample.
the image that reveals the presence of underlying and ongoing traditional hetero-feminine ideals.

The subject is shown directly meeting the gaze of the viewer in an unsmilng manner. Drawing on Goffman’s rituals of subordination, this semiotic behaviour can be understood as placing a demand on the viewer through submission (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006; Goffman 1979). Such a display illuminates the contradictory nature of contemporary womanhood, in which traditional feminine beauty and submissiveness is esteemed in combination with late modern ideals of individualism and ‘difference’. For ‘difference’ to be accepted, one must display characteristics of hyper-femininity, such as passivity and unadorned beauty as seen here (Harris 2004).

The linguistic message in the top corner of figure 7 states, ‘A school for life’ - the marketing of schooling as having lifelong benefits is a common advertising tool used among elite schools. This can be attributed firstly; to the specific role these schools have long served as sites for elite networking in which students’ laisse with other children from wealthy and well-positioned families, aiding the establishment of future profitable connections (Fahey et al 2015). Secondly, to the recent and increasing significance of ‘value-addedness’, which stems from emphasis on education as a commodity and future investment (Meadmore & Meadmore 2004).

Through figure 7, we see a distinct shift in how schools represent idealised womanhood, seemingly discarding traditional tropes of elite girls schooling with an image appealing directly to youth culture and supporting outdoor education. Despite the image not presenting traditional lady-like tropes of femininity that the rest of the sample employs, it uses subtler cues of traditional hetero-femininity such as passivity and unadorned beauty.
European Maidens: Romanticised and Pure

*Figure 8: School C,* ‘Romantic’ screenshot taken from school website landing page (2nd May 2018).

*Figure 8.1: School B,* ‘Maiden’ screenshot taken from school website landing page (2nd May 2018).

Romanticised and pure feminine motifs are commonly represented across elite girls’ schooling prospectuses, most clearly demonstrated by the above figures 3 and 3.1. In *figure 8* we see a cohort of girls on a hill facing a beautiful sunset scene, turned away from the viewer. The image composition of the students on a hilltop presents a height differential with the girls and the landscape below. One such denotative meaning of this positioning is that the students are surveying their domain – signifying the school’s wealth and prestige in facilitating students to figuratively and literally climb to ‘lofty heights’. While the image showcases the school’s extra-curricular capacity, it also builds a romantic visual narrative towards
ambiguous yet appealing futures. Looking off into the distance is an example of ‘wistful anticipation’ often associated with the traditional romantic love story that depicts a stereotypical heterosexual tale of a young woman in search of love (Wardman et al. 2010, p. 257). This constructs the subjects as princesses awaiting their knights in shining armour to be whisked off and live happily ever after (Walkerdine 1984). These traditional feminine tropes of love and lovability re-present elite girls’ schools as finishing schools for catching husbands.

*Figure 8.1* is taken from the outlier school that de-emphasizes traditional features of elite girls schooling. This image demonstrates that even schools that heavily market progressiveness also reproduce traditional feminine tropes through bodily aesthetics. Here the subject is seen gazing upwards into the light like a wistful maiden looking towards the unknown. A small social distance between viewer and subject through a close-up frame functions to create a sense of intimacy (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006, p. 124). Social distance refers to ‘how much the (human) participant’s body is represented in the frame of the respective image’ (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006). The behaviour of the participant also displays rituals of subordination as outlined by Goffman (1979), who states that the configuration of a visual form of address, either directly or indirectly, may relate to the viewer as an inferior relates to a superior. This is demonstrated through head-tilting and self-touching, constructing the subject as infantile and vulnerable.

The image composition renders comparison to Christian iconography, particularly that of Italian Renaissance portraiture. The women typically displayed in the profile portraits of the Italian Renaissance were not presented as individuals but as ideal women, used to display

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4 In line with Kress and van Leeuwen’s semiological framework, Behaviour refers to the ‘way interaction between the viewer and people shown in images are affected by the gaze of represented participants’ (Bell 2004, pp. 23-25).
wealth, lineage and beauty (Masters 2013). Art historian, Patricia Simons (1988), suggests that the decision to depict women in profile is to appear virtuous and show modesty. This gaze away from the viewer and exclusion of the genital region or breasts in the frame de-eroticises the female subject (see figure 8.3). As the works of Sara Delamont (1978) and others suggests, pure and ‘lady-like’ feminine ideals are demonstrated throughout women’s history in education, bound in the image of those middle-upper-class women who could prove their ‘respectability’ through disposition and appearance. Such conventions are arguably being played upon here, with the connotations of European high culture used to reiterate the advertisement’s targeting towards white (European), upper-middle class clientele.

The upwards gaze of the subject also signifies religious meaning - as though looking up to heaven, which is a common symbol of ascension (Dewald 1915), evident in the below figure 8.4 of Christian martyr, Saint Catherine. Through this allusion to Christian posturing and renaissance portraiture emerges an intention to imbue the scene with the connotative meaning of idealised virginal purity. This is a desirable image for elite girls’ schools to present as a sign of middle-class morality, not to mention the ‘official culture’ of schools that constructs students as ‘non-sexual’ (Allen 2007). Moral virtue has long been central to the Australian middle-class self-identity, constructed through knowing a set of moral rules that establishes distinction from others (Butler et al. 2017, Bourdieu 1984).

While likeness to the idealised feminine subject of Renaissance art may be apparent, discourses surrounding idealised feminine identity do not remain the same over time, nor are they passively accepted by all individuals of society (Skeggs 1997). Such imagery in combination with the overlayed text ‘find your difference’, plays into the paradoxical intermingling of tradition and progressiveness.
The Traditional-Progressive Paradox

The websites of many elite, independent schools feature claims of commitment to traditional values and beliefs, likely due to the reputation and the positional advantage of doing so (Symes 1998). This connection to the past is a common technique among these schools to effectively give validity and appeal as ‘guardians’ of tradition (Wilkins 2012; Symes 1998). Wilkins suggests that techniques of nostalgia work to locate schools within a utopian narrative that is structured on ‘themes of continuity, permanence and order’, providing comfort through localized expressions of ‘security, predictability, safety and settlement’ (Wilkins 2012, p. 76).

Left: Figure 8.3: ‘Idealized Portrait of a Lady’ portrait of Simonetta Vespucci as nymph (Sandro Botticelli ca. 1475)

Right: Figure 8.4: ‘Saint Catherine’, oil on canvas (Elisabetta Sirani 1638-1665)
Figure 9 is loaded with signifiers of eliteness built through the paradoxical interplay of traditional and progressive discourses, seen in the thumbnails of historic school architecture to the ‘extensive curriculum’. Through this image, School C, like most schools in this sample, demonstrates an acute awareness of their place as educational leaders, as well as a need to remain relevant with curricular trends as a means of maintaining their credibility in the competitive education market. This image displays ‘progressive’ gender practices through presenting a young woman with archetypal science equipment and a lab coat. These props signify a broader ideological shift in gender roles in which women are permitted (and encouraged) to participate in a traditionally masculine discipline - chemistry. Yet, implicitly the image also signifies the ongoing value of traditional gender norms through the display of hetero-feminine attractiveness, as defined by Cunningham (1986) with respect to specific female features, such as big eyes and high eyebrows, as well as neat long hair tied into a ponytail with a ribbon just visible. Additionally, the accompanying text signifies individualism, ‘academic success’, and a long history of ‘over 140 years’. While this may outwardly work to enhance the school’s elite reputation, the paradoxical bridging of tradition and progressiveness provides a connotative representation of Braidotti’s (2006) schizoid
double-pull. The image, like wider society, may celebrate new and supposedly progressive ideas, however, traditional values remain upheld and unchallenged.

The Co-Curricular Ideology: Service Girls

In the promotional materials analysed, a notable number of images depict sporting activities that both implicitly and explicitly emphasize girls’ participation in sport as encouraging friendship, fun and teamwork. Gottschall et al. (2010) provides an interesting contrast through the analysis of elite boys’ school promotional materials, in which the representations of boys in sport often portrays individuals that embody heterosexual and hyper-masculine ‘hard bodies’ central to the ‘competitive, self-enterprising, “successful” masculine subject’ (Gottschall et al. 2010, p. 23). Conversely, figure 10 displays a group of girls in sporting clothes, arm-in-arm, possibly in a team huddle, though not actually participating in a sporting activity. Groups of girls embracing with smiles or laughter are common photographic effects among promotional images of girls’ schools, the denotative meaning of which, signifies the importance of ‘inter-dependence’ and ‘co-curricular activities’ (Wardman et al. 2010). Here the overarching connotative meaning is of sociality over athleticism in sporting success.
While representations of co-curricular activities operate to bolster a school’s eliteness, these connotators also work to naturalise the competitive spirit of self-betterment (Wardman et al. 2010, p. 253). Thus, girls are positioned to play sport as a means of improving themselves through the development of physical health and interpersonal skills.

The cultural significance of self-betterment stems beyond individualistic motivations (O’Flynn & Petersen 2007), to the moral obligation to give back to society (Wardman et al. 2010). This is demonstrated through portrayals of sporting activities that benefit the whole group not just the individual. Emphasis on contributing to others is linked with the elite schooling focus on community service and is a way of promoting a caring, family-like environment (Fahey et al. 2015; Wardman et al. 2010). The notion of “the school as family” features prominently in promotional rhetoric across elite girls’ schooling prospectuses (Symes 1998, p. 138). Friendship or kinship displays seen throughout this dataset are representative of traditional gender norms that dictate a woman’s place is in the domestic sphere, synonymous with familial and emotional labour. This stems from the notion that girls’ skills and knowledge are constructed chiefly for the purpose of serving others. Hence elite girls’ schools promote girls’ service to their peers and the wider community (Wardman et al. 2010). As such, these materials present the ideal of ‘service girls’ with representations of womanhood contingent with caring, framing girls’ success as validated through service of others.

**The “Public Face” of Elite Girls’ Schooling in Australia**

Through this visual analysis, the connotative meanings gleaned from these promotional images reveal the hidden traditional hetero-feminine standards within. Further, it reveals a distinct pattern to how most of these schools choose to represent young femininities as framed through intentional displays of eliteness – with students, most of whom are white,
possessing feminine attractiveness, prim and proper uniforms, and long hair done up with ponytails and ribbons. Such representations illuminate an entire social climate from schools to parents to students who identify with (and are drawn to) white, middle-class, hetero-feminine standards of womanhood. The outlier, School B, provides the most extreme example of how unique marketing and innovative pedagogy can coalesce alongside themes of European high-culture and traditional hetero-feminine purity. This demonstrates the schizoid tensions in constructions of idealised womanhood, where notions of progressiveness and empowerment have been interwoven with older more oppressive feminine norms. The changes and continuities in representation of idealised womanhood in this schooling context have important links to the business ontology of education that has fuelled a shift in how elite girls’ schools choose to market and brand themselves, incorporating increasingly individualistic and post-feminist strategies to appeal to potential clientele.

This chapter also shows the ubiquity in representations of the ideal all-rounder girl in the elite girls’ schooling context. The prevalence of this image of idealised womanhood is supported by the lived experiences of graduates explored in the following chapter, whose self-narratives also describe pressure to embody the characteristics presented here, such as being expected to appear attractive to men and achieve interdisciplinary excellence. While I do not suggest that visual analysis offers concrete representations of the social life experienced by young women in these contexts, it helps to illuminate how schools wish to construct their social imagination, indicating how these representations may be understood and embodied by young women. Building on MacDougall’s conceptualisation of physiognomy, such visual materials make up an important aspect of the social aesthetic field of the elite girls’ schooling context. What this sort of sensory analysis shows is that all the senses, particularly the visual, must be considered when examining how students understand and practice womanhood.
Chapter Four: Recounting school lives

Through a practice approach, this study recognises the presentation of self as a valuable means of assessing the everyday-life of agents within these sites. Drawing on Bourdieu’s theorization of the social field and habitus, the following accounts contribute to understanding the dialectical relationship between schooling institutions and the individuals they re-produce. The ways in which these young women construct their narratives is understood as a social practice shaped by the established order of their social field. These social interactions are used as tools to negotiate and rearticulate the social world, rendered possible through the taken-for-granted embodiment of culture and meaning afforded by their privileged upbringing that informs the habitus, schema and dispositions needed to ‘succeed’ and belong within the social field of these schools (Bourdieu 1993, p. 96). The data analysis that follows employs a thematic and narrative-based approach to (re)construct the young women’s perspectives and experiences in ways that expose and explore how girls take up, resist or transform the dominant gendered representations of successful womanhood in the elite girls’ schooling context.

Qualitative Methodology

To explore the aims of this study, I draw upon qualitative data collected across June 2017 to August 2018. I interviewed a total of ten girls from four different Western Australian private, elite girls’ schools, employing a combination of one-on-one interviews and focus groups. Additionally, I conducted two one-on-one interviews with school administrators from PGC.
Common methodologies used in research on girls and schooling include participant observation (Kehily et al. 2002), interviews with students (Renold 2000; Youdell 2005), and surveys (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli 2005). Here, the use of focus groups enabled girls to publically negotiate and communicate their thoughts with each other and myself, while the one-on-one interviews facilitated the sharing of participants’ more personal feelings and elaborated biographical narratives.

All interviews ran up to one hour and were conducted using a semi-structured format. This comprised of a schedule with protocol and ten ‘essential’ questions, along with a number of relevant ‘recommended’ prompts. As noted by Schensul et al. (1999), semi-structured interviews combine flexibility with directionality to produce focused, qualitative, textual data. This method is optimal when exploring participants’ lived experiences. Graduates were asked to give reflective accounts of their time at school and administrators were asked to provide rationales for policies and rhetoric, thus painting a fuller image of the school ethos. With participant permission, the interviews were voice-recorded and transcribed, then coded on NVivo to facilitate thematic analysis.

Homogeneity in participant demographics (all-white, middle-class sample) offers greater control of variables across schooling experiences, limiting intersectional factors such as race and ethnicity. As previously discussed, by examining only girls within the dominant white middle-class cultural group, this study looks specifically at those positioned as the preeminent subjects of idealised womanhood. However, further research is needed to explore how this is understood and practiced among non-dominant groups in this schooling context. Certain factors among participants provide differentials in depth and angles of the data provided – for instance, some young women graduated just the previous year, with views
distinctly reflecting the dominant ideologies projected by their school, while others had more critical distance – having graduated two to six years ago.

It should be noted that the participant accounts are not understood to generate ‘authentic’ or ‘true’ knowledge. The research does not set out to capture self-evident truths or precise data that can be quantified and categorised, nor can the data produced in the interviews be seen as ‘pipelines’ to people’s interiors (Allan 2009, p. 148). Rather, through a situated qualitative approach, this thesis uses the participants’ perspectives to project into wider social, cultural, and political domains, pointing to possible trends at play affecting young women’s gendered practices in the elite girls’ schooling context.

**Focus Groups**

The two focus groups were designed to capture a range of different dialogues and experiences, in which girls were brought together to recount their schooling experiences and discuss topics of emerging importance in this study. Focus groups are beneficial in production of large quantities of data through group discussion, often revealing information otherwise withheld in one-on-one interviews. They also tend to highlight groupthink – or normative popularly-held assumptions that can be distinct from individual views. Despite the moderator’s best efforts, a focus group can generate numerous problematic variables due to its performative dimensions, such as self-presentation and social desirability (Hollander 2004, p. 627). However; group tension is viewed as a useful way to assess public discourse (Smithson 2000). Hollander (2004) notes that triangulation methods (such as combining one-on-one and group interviews) assist researchers to disentangle participants’ responses and their connection to the social contexts of the focus group (p. 632), thus mitigating problematic group dynamics.
The first focus group, conducted on the 14th of August, 2018, was comprised of three young women from different schools, unknown to one another: Elisa from Osmund and Jenny from SCLC both graduated a year ago – in 2017, and Amy from St Joe’s, graduated two years ago – in 2016. The second focus group, conducted on the 7th of September 2018, was comprised of four girls, all friends, who graduated in 2017 from St Joe’s: Caitlin, Esther, Annabelle, and Megan.

The anonymous focus group was recruited via announcement at a large first-year anthropology and sociology lecture at UWA. This recruitment method, of course, only captured women pursuing academic studies. A distinct limitation of this approach is that it over-represents a certain demographic and renders others invisible, painting an incomplete picture of young women’s experience. Each girl in this group felt differently about their schooling (Elisa hated school, Jenny loved school, and Amy was ambivalent), it is clear through their discussion that they all experienced the pressure to perform academic excellence and social excellence (to be bright and beautiful) in their respective schooling contexts. Nonetheless, whether due to inability, unwillingness, or both, all expressed ambivalence towards meeting the all-rounder ideal. This study draws particular focus to Elisa’s self-narrative. Her experience of ‘othering’, which she attributes to having an (in)visible disability, illuminates key elements of the all-rounder ideal, namely: individual effort and able-bodied-ness. Elisa presents an account characterised by dialectics of resistance and negotiation between herself and her school. Through her academic capacity and ability to “pass” as an all-rounder due to the hidden nature of her disability, she provides an interesting example of ambivalent identity formation and alternative femininity.

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5 Bracketing used here to emphasize that Elisa’s disability is both seen and unseen.
The St Joe’s focus group was initially drawn from a secondary contact in my own network then recruited via snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is when the researcher accesses informants through contact information that is provided by other informants (Noy 2008).

While I use this sampling method, I am aware of the social significance of who is and who is not referring others, as well as who is and who is not being referred by others (Noy 2008).

Comprised of four friends, the focus group had several instances of groupthink and notable scrutiny of individual opinions: a marker of their previously established relationships. In contrast to the first focus group, the perspectives of these participants notably still embodied their school’s traditional-progressive ideology: all supported the upkeep of traditions that ‘we all valued’, as Megan stated on behalf of the group, and all self-identified as ‘feminists’, yet displayed post-feminist understandings of gender inequality. For instance, several girls commented that gender quotas in the workplace were unnecessary and even insulting. Two of the four girls, Esther and Megan, also self-identified as ‘conservatives’, attributing the formation of their ‘liberal progressive’ stances to a combination of school values, parental influence and self-orientation. Esther also revealed she was currently working for the Liberal party, showing her commitment to this ideology. Notably, these two girls also appeared to function as the dominant voices within the group, potentially swaying the responses of the other two members, who described themselves as ‘open-minded’. All four participants enrolled at St Joe’s in junior school and spent upwards of eight years in the schooling institution. As Bourdieu posits, the earlier an agent enters a field the greater their learned ignorance. This is reflected in Esther’s comment that she could not imagine going to another school as, ‘[St Joe’s] is all I’ve ever known’.
One-on-One Interviews

This thesis chiefly examines the one-on-one interview I conducted with Pia – the head prefect and graduate of PGC in 2016. Pia’s story reports the pleasures and pains of ‘‘having it all’’, in many ways representing the epitome of post-feminist ‘‘girl power’’ and the ‘‘supergirl’’ identity. Pia took full advantage of the opportunities afforded through her upbringing in a white, middle-class family and a school culture that rewards ‘confidence, self-esteem, flair, and ambition’ (Renold & Allan 2006, p. 466). Analogously, in 2017, I conducted a one-on-one interview with Ali, also a PGC graduate from 2015 that embodies the all-rounder ideal through a similar story of success. While not as overtly exceptional as Pia in her accomplishments – Ali was capable across a range of disciplines and enjoyed her schooling overall. Ali’s interview yielded largely anecdotal evidence, however, as our discussion did not include the critical engagement that Pia was keen to discuss, and thus Ali’s self-narrative is only drawn upon as supplementary data.

On the 5th of August 2017, I conducted an interview that painted a very different personal story – one of exclusion and ‘othering’. Gemma, a 2011 graduate of PGC, felt severely traumatised by her schooling and actively opposed the all-rounder ideal. Due to Gemma’s position as a notable outlier in both age and experience to the other participants, her self-narrative presents a useful comparative case study to the other participants, illuminating more precisely what the ideal all-rounder is not and how this is experienced.

On the 18th of August 2017, I conducted an interview with the Principal of PGC, Amanda Cartwright, and over the interview’s 40-minute duration, it became apparent to me that she represented an archetypal embodiment of the contemporary post-feminist ideal of ‘successful womanhood.’ A white middle-class, hetero-feminine, mother of two, with a very successful
career, Amanda projected confidence and enterprise with a mantra of ‘walk the talk’. In her
decade-long principalship at PGC, she restructured and revived the school through building a
stronger school community, creating new facilities and programs, and generating higher
attendance levels. Amanda’s perspective provides unique insight into the motivations behind
decisions that have influenced school public image and student experience.

In addition to Amanda’s administrative perspective, on the 31st of July 2017, I conducted an
interview with Kathy, the dean of senior’s education at PGC. A veteran teacher of
approximately forty-five years, Kathy spent twenty-six years of her working-life employed at
PGC. While our interview was quite a brief one, due to her limited availability, her matter-of-
fact responses and experienced view of recent changes complements Amanda’s more
elaborate and calculated responses, offering further insight into dominant school cultures.

To best explore the aims of this thesis, I explore particular facets of the data, namely, certain
notable school rhetoric and policies that show changes and continuities in ideals. Secondly, I
draw chiefly on the contrasting self-narratives of Pia and Elisa to examine the dimensions of
the dominant all-rounder ideal from students’ lived experience, making reference to various
other participant experiences to supplement the data.

School Administration: Preservation and Change

I asked Kathy what she thought was the advantage of an all-girls schooling environment, she
responded:

I think they're in a more supportive environment where they're not constantly being …
challenged or being expected to conform to some preconceived image or idea of what
they should be and what they should look like. So I think actually, they feel more
comfortable, more supported, and they feel they have therefore more freedom to be whoever or whatever they want to be.

The above view plays into the post-feminist idea that elite girls’ schooling operates as a utopian site of girls’ empowerment, free from masculine domination and the male gaze. This has long been the appeal of girls’ schooling, however, the question remains: how is this claim backed up through policies and rhetoric in this specific context and what decisions are being made to address recent changes in standards of acceptable womanhood?

Leadership

Amanda placed great emphasis on promoting can-do dispositions in students through ‘values-based decision-making’ and leadership qualities. For instance, in 2016 she introduced the ‘Institute for Leadership Education’ (ILE); described on the school website as follows: ‘graduates [of the Institute] will be recognised for their exemplary communication and decision making, for providing service to others and for competencies required for effective international relations’ (PGC Website 2017).

Amanda clarified that her investment in leadership was not because she ‘wants a Prime Minster from our alumni’ or ‘women in the boardroom’ but because ‘it’s an informed view that actually leadership is all about self in many ways’. She elaborated:

For me, leadership is about self-regulation. Leadership is about emotional regulation. Leadership is about starting with yourself and then leadership is about making choices for the betterment of not only yourself but the betterment of other people.

Amanda’s conception of leadership as self-regulation signifies individualistic notions of success in the schooling context, synonymous with contemporary professional can-do womanhood. This is further demonstrated in figures 11 and 11.1 below: photos I took of banners that were hung up in the school auditorium. They encapsulate the emphasis on
leadership towards the production of high-flying career women. Simultaneously, promoting selfless values that reinscribe traditional feminine ideals of service and restraint – reinforcing the schizoid embodiment of appropriate lady-like forms of success.

![Figure 1](Left: 'Lead') & ![Figure 1.1](Right: 'Decision-making'): Photographs I took, with permission, of banners at PGC (18th August 2017)

The central questions remain: how effectively do progressive administrative discourses disseminate into the school ethos, and in what ways do young women come to understand and/or internalise these messages within this social space? My interview with Pia sheds light on this through her observations as head prefect during the implementation of the Institute of Leadership Education (ILE) in its first year of operation. Pia perceived Cartwright’s rationale behind the Institute was to ‘have something to recognise what we’re doing at this school’ and described it as follows:

[With] our year group – they just wanted like the prefects to do it, or just someone who would just start it … I don’t even know where my certificate is … But it was whatever you want, like it was in regards to all these different faculties … It was like the most retarded stuff, just so you could get a certain amount of points that led to you
getting [a leadership certificate] … So it was like traveling overseas, joining the bands [and so on].

While it would be unreasonable to expect any transformation in the habitus of a student who experienced only the early implementation of this initiative, what Pia’s sceptical statement does illuminate is how the project was perceived as largely a superficial means of promoting the school’s image as an elite producer of can-do girls. Additionally, it demonstrates how the school systematically rewards those students who best perform the all-rounder ideal through participation in the widest range of areas.

**Girl-power**

As previously shown, elite girls’ schools are sites in which numerous post-feminist cultural scripts and products are taken up and re-produced (Charles 2013, p. 80). The interviews revealed the representation of ‘girl-power’ as pervasive across multiple levels of the elite schooling social field. The anonymous focus group highlighted the prevalence of this rhetoric in their conversation: Amy observed that her school would use ‘weird business-model language’ to say “We’re going to *make* you from girls into ladies that are ready to face the world”,’ noting that the word “ladies” was used significantly more than “women”. Jenny added that her school had slight difference in rhetoric, saying: ‘Our [school] catchphrase … was like this constantly spoken, unofficial policy of “strong, independent young women”,’ with emphasis on *young* women. She described the common speech of, ‘You can do anything girls, there’s no such thing as “men’s jobs”. You can be the most successful – the best – you can be the one to make the change’. Elisa contributed her school’s variation of the same trope as, “Remarkable women” with ‘The Three C’s of Capable, Courageous and Caring’. This discussion captures the ubiquity of post-feminist rhetoric among these schools that delineates the specific ideals of can-do girlhood. As Elisa points out, ‘I think the kind of woman that
they’re trying to shape everyone into being is perfectly valid, a perfectly well-rounded person, probably would be a benefit to society, but like you can’t expect that of everyone.’

*Figure 12* below, a photograph I took of an advertisement for one of the focus schools, captures the strong yet vague emphasis on feminine success, which – as the earlier image analysis illustrates - characterises the marketable form of faux-feminism that these schools represent:

![Advertisement](image)

*Figure 12:* ‘Success’ photograph I took of bus-stop advertisement for one local elite, private girls’ school (1st November 2018).

This push towards vague, far-reaching aspirations is also exemplified in Megan’s statement, ‘I think that [St Joe’s] empowers you to go try things, but never really follow through’. The St Joe’s focus group provided a notable instance of student-based ‘girlpower’, recounting the formation of a student-run feminist club. Annabelle elaborated:
The year group two years before us did the ‘Gal’s Club’. They started this like feminist group – it wasn’t really a feminist group – it was like a club. Um … it was more of just a discussion forum because we didn’t always talk about, like, feminism … but it got a lot of people interested in them. We used to have these massive meetings where like, you know, we’d be in a classroom and there’d be, like, kids sitting on desks and on the floor and stuff, and we’d just have discussions – so they’d put a question on the board or something and we’d talk about it or they’d organise some sort of activity … they put up movies and we got into groups and like applied the [Bechdel] tests to the movies - that was a good one.

Interestingly, it transpired that the students who pioneered the ‘Gal’s Club’ intended to call it the ‘Feminist Club’, however, when seeking permission from the school, the original name was rejected and they were required to choose a different name. It is undeniable that the latter option provides a much more watered-down image of women’s empowerment, one that ‘wasn’t really a feminist group’.

The popularity, intention and function of this independent and student-led club serves as a powerful example of the prominence that notions of women’s empowerment have gained in public discourse over recent years. This demonstrates a distinctive shift in the level of interest and awareness in young feminism. When Gemma graduated high school seven years ago, feminism was recognised and addressed by the school, though it provoked little student interest. While Annabelle stated that the group had continued after the pioneering year group left, it underwent a gradual indoctrination into the school values system of prestige and image displaying. However, it remained a powerful tool in engagement with fellow peers (across year group boundaries) and in promoting responsible citizenship and innovation (celebrated traits of the ideal all-rounder girl). Annabelle stated:

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6 The Bechdel test is a measure usually applied to analyse mass media gender biases through representation of women in fiction (Garcia et al. 2014) following 3 criteria: (1) *It has to contain at least two women in it*, (2) *who talk to each other*, (3) *about something besides a man* (Bechdel 1985).
It got passed down to me because there was no one in the year above us who did it, so we did it that year. Then in year 12 it was so hard to maintain, so we’d do a meeting every like couple of weeks, maybe three weeks? Um, but I don’t know if it’s still going or not … Though that sort of thing [started] like an interesting change that happened while I was at school because … it got the ball rolling on people forming all different clubs and committees. And it was actually, like, you had to put it to the principal and, like, we got badges! That was my biggest achievement for the Gal’s Club, we got badges and we had, like, a committee.

The club’s name and transformation over the years draws comparison to the emergence of the term ‘grrrl’, coined by riot grrl culture in the mid-1990s. The young punk feminist women who pioneered this movement were invested in provoking and politicising the way girlhood was represented with the word ‘grrrl’ exhibiting a snarling, enraged woman no longer willing to be ‘nice’ (Harris 2003, p. 46). However, over time they saw their message of girl power became ‘homogenized, commodified and sold back to them in the form of clothing, accessories, toys and popular music’ (Harris 2003, p. 75).

The introduction of purple as a school symbol at PGC operates as a key example of a ‘girl-power’ scheme. One of Amanda’s first initiatives was to emphasize the colour purple in conjunction with green and white to represent the colour of the suffragettes, a symbol of women’s empowerment. When I asked Amanda for a rationale behind her emphasis on the colour purple, she stated it functioned as a link to women’s global connectedness:

We’re not that isolated – we’re actually connected to the world, and [purple] is a symbol. This is a way of indicating that PGC thinks far beyond the [local] suburbs, we think about our relationship to women globally.

This comment illuminates the way globalised imperatives have been imbued into girlpower within this context. Subsequently, a committee in charge of uniform changes (that Amanda was not involved in) opted to embrace this purple symbolism and add it to the uniform. Students and alumni criticised Amanda for the change. This included Gemma, who was in
Year 10 when Amanda first took a key leadership role at her school, noting a distinct shift towards women’s empowerment rhetoric:

I found [empowerment rhetoric] much more noticeable when Ms Cartwright became principal. Because like, before her – Gordon Quinn [previous principal] didn’t really push the empowerment thing, but when Ms Cartwright came in she was like, “Yeah, feminism! The colour purple! Woo!”

Gemma expressed further cynicism about the effectiveness of this initiative and the representations of feminism that Amanda projected in her first few years of leadership, stating:

I’m not doubting that she honestly believes she’s a feminist. I’m just saying it’s very surface level. It’s very “white middle-class woman” feminism. There isn’t anything much deeper about race or sexuality there or respect to sexual feminism. I think a woman who one of her primary things was, “Let’s change the school uniform to purple!” was not focusing on the deeper issues there. Purple, yeah it really fixed everything. [said with heavy sarcasm]

Amanda recalled that on the front page of a local paper was the claim that ‘purple was [her] favourite colour and [she was] a sexually repressed lesbian’. This incident highlights the challenges schools face in negotiating progressiveness-versus-tradition in relation to intolerance in the local conservative community. As Gemma acknowledges, the school was very much subject to its clientele in the local area:

[Local] suburbs people are crazy and also well-connected, so when they have a problem with something they can go make it into a huge thing. So, I understand the pressure on the school to not rock the boat or upset anyone too powerful, but also you should [support] children, not traumatising them.

Gemma’s rather damning view of Amanda’s initial feminist engagement is contrasted by Pia’s experience some five years after Gemma graduated. Pia noted several initiatives headed by Amanda Cartwright, including an activity where students said, ‘women can, women will, women should,’ and were asked to finish the sentence, which she believed did have an
underlying effect ‘that travels down to the little kids’. Like Gemma, however, she also felt that this approach to women’s empowerment was ‘superficial’, saying it was as if ‘someone’s just implanted it in your brain rather than you’ve actually thought about it’.

Pia also recalled an instance where Amanda invited a nearby elite, private boys’ school to join an assembly where she gave a speech on the impact of gendered language, saying how phrases like, “You kick like a girl”, or “You run like a girl” is not OK’. Pia noted that students responded largely with embarrassment: ‘Everyone was like, ‘Oh my god, I can’t believe she did that!’

The above instances are perhaps the best examples of genuine feminist engagement beyond marketing or preparing for can-do success. However, it is also apparent that the students did not respond accordingly to these appeals towards empowerment.

**STEM Subjects: Bright Girls with Bright Futures**

‘I think the empowerment stuff that [the school] pushed was getting to these heights – these careers, like male-dominated professions, and that was about the extent of it.’

– Annabelle, St Joe’s

As previously noted, the Australian response to gender inequality in schools over the last 20 years has been the universal implementation of masculinised curriculum. This was linked with a push to get girls into science and maths back to the Nineteen-eighties and Nineties, which has had a resurgence over more recent years (Marais 2007). Girls’ schools, in particular, have taken up this mantle as a way of promoting the idea that elite young women are set to take on male-dominated fields upon entering the work force. The St Joe’s group discussed how they experienced this emphasis on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematic) subjects:
A: [In career education] it was like, “Here are the options: it was science, it was engineering [M: ‘so true’ / E: ‘yep’], it was medicine”, and then they had like one lady come in [from a local university] ... and she had a couple of slides on architecture and design or something – but she skipped through them! And was like, ‘Oh, we won’t have time for this,’ [laughs] Girls who are like arty or like not interested in doing bloody engineering were like, “What?!”

B: So they were really going for the traditional masculine top subjects?

A: Yeah, so that whole like, ‘It’s empowering women, you can do these jobs, like let’s focus on these!’

E: And it’s almost discouraging. Like arts degrees were never really spoken about in school [A: so true], so it was very much like, ‘We need to fill women in these fields, so you all need to do this!’ [A: Yeah!] It’s like, but what about other careers? Like we still need women in other careers.

Through this conversation, we see the push to esteem middle-upper class girls towards filling male-dominated prestigious work – to be ‘the [international] trailblazers’ as Pia noted. Pia suggested that the kind of woman her school seeks to produce: ‘Maybe isn’t restrained by the normal constraints on women, so they want [us] to come out and if there are barriers be like, ‘Actually no! I’m going to step over that!’

The above perspectives show re-articulation of ideal young female citizenship and post-feminist notions of girl-power, whereby white middle-class girls are positioned through their privilege and reflexivity as most able to ‘step over’ the barriers of gender inequality and the destabilized conditions of the late capitalist economy. The post-feminist discourse upheld in these schools places demands on girls to excel in areas previously exclusive to men as a practice of empowerment, however, devalues traditionally feminine disciplines such as arts and humanities. Indeed, this dominant school discourse appears to also devalue traditional childrearing and motherhood – as Pia also noted, ‘there wasn’t much on family, they kind of avoided that subject’.
**Tradition: Etiquette and uniform**

The embodiment of the traditional-progressive paradox is often defined by the policies and strategies of the schools’ principals, with some leaning more towards progressiveness than others. Amanda had taken a particularly progressive stance in her rhetoric and policies. When asked about the process of balancing tradition and progressiveness, she stated:

> The only time it becomes an issue is if tradition holds us back, because we have a responsibility to be progressive. We are actually harming our graduates if we do not prepare them for what is now and is likely to be in the future.

This reveals an active attempt to bridge traditional and contemporary values and also reflects perhaps the privileged position (economic and cultural capital) that the school has with which to engage in progressive broader trends. Yet Amanda also noted, ‘As long as traditions of the past align with the values now, it’s actually quite easy navigation’. This is a telling insight into how continuities of ladylike dress and disposition, as well as promotion of feminine values such as self-sacrifice and care, can remain prevalent in this schooling context, as they have not been disrupted by newer norms, merely incorporated.

When I asked Kathy about whether PGC was looking to modify the traditional gendered uniform, she stated that she didn’t foresee any changes:

> As long as you fulfil whatever our requirements are, it doesn't matter what your gender is actually doing – if you want to be part of [any] community or group, you have to conform to whatever are the group rules. You know that no one is forcing you to stay – and that’s part of those rules just as rules. Ultimately, you’re not going to get
on if you’re an anarchist and just decide you’re not going to do anything. You’ll get out there and you can’t get a job.

Kathy’s statement maintains the view that schools should operate as a training-ground towards career readiness and acceptable citizenship, downplaying the impact of traditional hetero-feminine norms. This focus on professional success is shown to be the overarching driver of the school and overlooks the impact that feminine day-to-day practices have on student’s gendered habitus.

Despite the perceived outcomes towards professional success, the school’s function as a ‘finishing school’ for catching respectable husbands is still prevalent. For instance, Pia recalled participating in etiquette classes in 2016, stating:

For our year 12 ball, a few weeks before, they had a lady come in and talk to us about courtesy at a ball, which was really interesting. It was so weird! … So she’d be like, ‘Alright, so the man comes in and you have to let him open the door for you; make sure when you’re sitting you have to put your legs to the side, tuck them under your chair,’ and I was like, ‘What is happening?’ - Taught us about cutlery, taught us about all that stuff.

The distinctly Victorian feminine ideals promoted in this exercise are at odds with the career-oriented empowerment rhetoric that the administrators employ and consequently appears out of touch or ‘weird’ to the students themselves. This account clearly illustrates that training appropriate ladylike behaviour remains an important outcome of elite girls’ schooling.

Graduate Perspectives: All-rounder Girls

I explore the lived realities of the all-rounder ideal by introducing Pia, whose schooling experience represents the most archetypal example of all-rounder ‘girling’ in this study. Pia was a leading prefect of PGC in 2016 and demonstrated in our one-on-one interview a
disposition of confidence and sassiness, synonymous with the current can-do standards. However, having left school over a year ago, her perspective revealed a critical eye for her former school and the dominant post-feminist and neoliberal discourses it re-presents. She appears to have become largely disenchanted with the pressure that PGC placed on her to ‘be someone’, saying:

Coming out [of school], it’s taken me a year to really realise, in the least horrible way, like I know I’m nobody, I’m not going to do something amazing so I may as well do what I want. Because you leave school and even if they say, ‘Oh you can do whatever you want!’ – Really! They’re like, ‘You can do anything you want, you’re going to be amazing, and you need to apply for all these scholarships and you have to be recognised and win awards.’ And like, of course that’s not what they’re actually doing, but that’s just what it felt like. And you can blame it on so many things, but I think it’s just the culture I guess.

This statement encapsulates several of the themes already explored through representations produced in the advertisements of the top Australian elite girls’ schools. She prefaced the above cynicism, firstly, by describing how her initial views upon graduating were still very much aligned with the school’s dominant discourses. Namely, the maintenance of prestige and the intense push for students to fulfil their ‘all-rounder’ potential:

When I first left – loved it; I thought [PGC] was brilliant. I think people thought, “Oh, you’re stuck in that little bubble’, and of course you are, but I thought … there’s worse bubbles, like they put in so much effort, like especially in my final year being kind of behind the scenes kind of thing, you see how much effort they put in. They’re trying so hard to give you the best education and people would be like, “Oh, you’re suffocating,” and I’d be like, “Yeah, but that’s kind of necessary” – Lord of the Flies kind of shit, if you don’t kind of brainwash kids they’re going to- [breaks off laughing] Like that sounds so weird, but that kind of was my mentality!

Pia recalls her former belief in the normative expectation for girls to strive in the school’s competitive ‘hothouse’ environment, implying that hyper-surveillance of girls is “for our own
good”. This dominant ideology is seen to be re-produced by teachers, parents and students alike.

Contrastingly, upon entering university, Pia experienced a gradual process of self-discovery – feeling she has reached a point of personal liberation, exclaiming, ‘At the moment … I’m like, “Oh God, I can do what I want!”’. She then immediately checked herself, adding, ‘Like, it’s still good to study and plan for the future, but … I like being alone’. This comment shows Pia’s explicit knowledge of and commitment to the normative can-do pathway of feminine success, encompassing forward-planning and higher education. She continued, ‘I’m becoming more – this sounds really weird – but I feel the most womanly I’ve ever felt. Maybe it’s because I’ve grown up a bit … like in terms of boys, in terms of letting loose … I’ve become a bit more independent’. Here, Pia somewhat bashfully describes becoming a fully-fledged, agentic sexual subject. This highlights the well-documented absence of student sexual identities in school, which several studies attribute to school doxa that frames students as non-sexual and innocent (Youdell 2005). Educational sociologist, Louisa Allen, suggests, that it is often through a school’s negative ‘what-not-to-do’ approach to sexual education, that young women report feeling that their sexual desire and pleasure is ‘risky’ or ‘bad’ (Allen 2007, p. 227).

A notable instance of how elite girls’ schools negatively construct student sexuality arose in Ali and Gemma’s interviews, in which, both described a ‘controversy’ where a large file of girls’ nude pictures were leaked and widely circulated online. The school responded with ‘disciplinary action and placement on the child sex register’, along with allegedly ‘naming and shaming’ those involved during a school assembly. This exposes the tensions between young women’s self-identity as active sexual subjects and the school’s ideal student identity as non-sexual. By placing individual responsibility on students as sexual decision-makers
while constructing them as ‘child-like’, schools fail to nurture sexual agency, which is central in popular representations of the ‘can-do’ ideal (Allen 2007; Charles 2013).

The demonstration of leadership skills is central towards the re-production of the successful all-rounder girl, the pinnacle recognition of which, is being appointed a prefectorial role. I was interested in how Pia understood her role and the requirements necessary to fulfil it. I asked her, firstly, why she wanted to have a lead prefect role, and secondly, why she thought it was appointed to her, she responded:

I thought that it would look good on a resume. No one gives a shit – bugger! And I liked the idea of leading a team, like I’m very – like in my leadership qualities – it’s all about the mood of the team and the vibe of the team, rather than like – I’m really shit at like being very organised and actually organising events. Because I’m more … [into] the communicative side of things! So that’s kind of why I wanted it and I think I had a good reputation within my year group. Um, and I think that I was very, very involved with everything, so people knew my name. I guess if I didn’t do sport and music, people wouldn’t know me as well so they wouldn’t have voted for me.

The above criteria that Pia perceived as instrumental to her attainment of a lead prefect role distinctly encompasses the all-rounder ideal – as well as factors of popularity: being well-known and well-liked in the school. Her self-reflection as a communicative team-leader rather than as an administrative leader embodies the emphasis on collaboration and selflessness that elite girls’ schools promote in accordance with traditional hetero-feminine values, whereby ‘it’s all about the mood of the team’. I prompted her to further elaborate on the practices that constituted her involvement ‘with everything’:

**B:** So … did you do like orchestra or singing? Did you do chorale choir?

**P:** Fucking everything. Urgh! Never been so busy in my life!

**B:** All the sports and all the music?

**P:** Yeah, one of those – one of those kids.

**B:** And drama?
P: Bit of drama – did the [school] production.
B: Ah, the “all-rounder” as they say.
P: The classic all-rounder, oh God!

Despite having been evidently successful in meeting the school’s all-rounder standards, the tone of Pia’s response held a level of derision. She reflected that the demand to perform in all areas was largely unrealistic, exclaiming, ‘Who wants to do music if you’re tone deaf?!’ Nonetheless, she did participate and maintain a social standing with peers and teachers through her capacity to manage being ‘so busy’ doing ‘fucking everything’. While she acknowledged the incredible education she received, her response was infused with disillusionment.

Ali, who graduated one year prior to Pia, attributed her overall enjoyment of school to her ability to embody the all-rounder ideal:

I did enjoy it. I think I was definitely one of those students who tried to get involved in a lot. So like, I was part of the PGC jazz band, I did a sport every term, I got on well with teachers, I think – and I think those make you have a good experience. Like I definitely know girls who didn’t enjoy their time, and I think that’s because they weren’t involved – don’t know if they didn’t want to be. But [they were] sort of just like on the outskirts.

This comment about lack of involvement placing girls on the ‘outskirts’ further illuminates the ways normative “all-rounderism” operates to exclude those that cannot or will not fulfil the formidable expectations of this schooling context.

The all-rounder ideal in these elite girls’ schools has distinct foundations in pervasive post-feminist discourses evident through rhetoric of ‘girl-power’ and empowerment. The participant responses varied in their degrees of taking up or resisting these ideas. The St Joe’s
group demonstrated the most distinct internalisation of post-feminism. All assertively self-identifying as ‘feminists’ yet simultaneously presenting post-feminist notions – that the battle for gender equality was already won. For instance, Megan stated, ‘Quotas [in the workplace] are so degrading, I think quotas are worse – they’re just like, you only got it because you’re a woman’. This suggests a belief that women and men are positioned on a level-playing field in career attainment and advancement, disregarding patriarchal power differentials that present ongoing structural inequalities and gender prejudice across the Australian workforce. This was also suggested by Caitlin, at the beginning of the focus group when asked to describe what kind of woman she was, she stated:

I think I’m pretty socially progressive … not very judgemental. Um, I guess I value – I think I kind of like [believe] that women are equal, like everyone’s kind of equal in the workplace, there’s not like a divide – kind of like, shits me a bit. But I also understand that I can’t quite figure out where I stand – like with gender roles as you get older – if I want to have a kid and start a family, I’m going to have to, like, contemplate that a little more in my head.

Unlike Megan, Caitlin presents layers of contradiction in her understanding of post-feminism and was the only graduate who considered the potential challenges of trying to balance family and a career. She firstly expresses her irritation at the suggestion that there is a gender divide in the workplace, however, she then omits that this equality may not extend to women who wish to have families. Her schizoid positioning on workplace equality both rearticulates her school’s ideology that promotes the notion that women can ‘have it all’ in the workplace, yet also delineates her understanding of the instability of this discourse given the reality of women’s continued role as primary care-givers in Australian family structures. Underlying the notion that she may have to re-evaluate her post-feminist position if she wants to have a family, is the taken-for-granted assumption of ongoing traditional gender roles. Upheld by
both institutions and individuals, this assumption maintains that a woman’s function is in
domestic and care spheres, despite the newly feminised workforce. It is also important to
account for the extent to which this post-feminist discourse was constructed through the
groupthink of this homogenous group of friends and thus may not reflect all the members’
personal beliefs. It is possible that Caitlin was tempering her response to reflect those of her
friends through a pre-established knowledge of the dominantly upheld post-feminist values
and beliefs. However, the tension within this statement, as she chose to articulate it, reflects
the internalised gendered norms that constitute her divided habitus in this social field.

I asked all participants to describe where they saw themselves in 10 to 20 years’ time. Many
articulated feeling unsure about their future; yet had simultaneously made ‘tentative’ plans.
For instance, Pia stated:

If I’m being completely honest, I genuinely think I have no idea [about my future].
But, for the purpose of this - well, I’m studying international relations. I’m not
interested in politics and I might be going to China next year to learn Chinese, so
maybe I might do an agricultural science degree and pair international relations with
that in China. Or I could try that and then realise that I hate it and that I actually just
want to do something more chilled, so I don’t know. Um, indigenous affairs kind of
interests me as well, but I don’t know if you can just enter a job in indigenous affairs.

Amy likewise articulated modest plans to find a career stemming from her geography degree
‘so that hopefully my study hasn’t gone to waste,’ she explained. She goes on to describe a
more coherent imagined future, yet pairs it with a sense of disdain for planning:

I think I’m interested in [geography], but I think it’s going to be way more relevant in
the future, like people are going to realise that you do need to look after the earth and
then I’ll be the person that’s like, ‘I studied this, I’m prepared!’ … But anyways, yeah
I don’t really think about the future too much – I kind of just like – it stresses me out
so I just, like, do what I’m doing.
It is interesting to note the well-considered strategies both girls demonstrated despite feeling ‘stressed out’ or having ‘no idea’ about the future. The intense focus on young women to have a plan, have a trajectory, and follow it, is something I remember distinctly when I was finishing high school. I experienced a barraging of questions from all directions that went down the lines of, ‘So what are you doing? What career can you obtain through that degree? Where are you going with your life?’ These questions are evidently drilled into young women at these schools to ensure they have considered what university to go to and what scholarships to apply for, as evidenced by Pia’s statement:

You leave school and even if they say, ‘Oh you can do whatever you want!’ Really, they’re like, ‘You can do anything you want, you’re going to be amazing, and you need to apply for all these scholarships and you have to be recognised and win awards.’ And like, of course that’s not what they’re actually doing, but that’s just what it felt like.

This is further demonstrated by the St Joe’s focus group, in which Esther made a point to the general consensus of the group, stating:

For girls that didn’t take a uni pathway, I’d say it was discouraged if you didn’t want to go to uni. So I think there were like eight girls doing general [non-tertiary entrance subjects] and I think the people that have gone into uni not knowing exactly what they want to do and then like dropping out or changing, like I think that’s a bit hard because the school’s like, ‘You need to do this.’… Like, no one was ever encouraged to get a full-time job right out of school.

The overall societal focus on elite girls as the ideal subjects of the new economy is distinctly articulated through the demand for them to show planning for their future. While the participants feel anxiety and uncertainty about their future directions, perhaps lacking the expected determination of a can-do girl, they have a rehearsed response of their imagined desirable future that quells society’s concerns. However, the need to have a plan, even if largely a performance, still operates to keep young can-do women on track.
It is important to note that the intensity in which these schools go about guiding students towards “respectable” career-trajectories is very much a response to the desired outcomes demanded by high-paying parents – to produce girls capable of maintaining their class status, or indeed, facilitate upwards social mobility. If the schools were to offer trade apprenticeships or other likewise ‘working-class’ career-paths, this would be at odds with the ambitions of middle to upper-class parents who have invested heavily in the concerted cultivation (Maxwell & Aggleton 2013) of their daughters towards reproduction of similar or higher cultural and economic capital. These schools are businesses and the product they advertise is ‘stronger, brighter girls’ – to use the words of a St Joe’s advertisement I saw on the back of a bus recently.

Regarding the embodiment of the all-rounder disposition, displays of assertiveness emerged notably in my interview with Pia and the St Joe’s girls. Both Pia and the St Joe’s girls shared the view that their year groups were outspoken and highly motivated to mobilise over shared concerns regarding school changes. Pia perceived her year group as highly critical and effective when it came to contentious issues that affected them. For instance, when they were prevented from wearing their leaver’s jumpers outside of school, she recalled their response:

Instead of just being like, “Aw, that sucks,” and just naughtily do it, we’d be like, “Why?! Why can’t we do it?!” Like everyone got really fired up about it. Um, and we all signed a petition … so we were very active and outspoken.

Pia’s characterisation of her peer group presents a distinctive departure from traditional feminine docile norms, signifying the embodiment of declarative can-do girls. The following conversation among the St Joe’s girls also plays into can-do ‘outspokenness’, when asked how they would characterise their year group:
E: We changed a lot of stuff and we were quite, like, you know, outspoken. Like we kind of get stuff done, but we weren’t like-
A: We weren’t annoying
E: We weren’t annoying about it. And we did it, like I don’t know, we’d sit down and we’d go like, ‘Here’s what we want,’
B: We’ve got a petition, we’ve got plans!
A: Yeah! Literally! We had like polls on our Facebook and would be like, ‘This is the result of the poll!’

This excerpt articulates the hetero-feminine nature of the new ideal can-do girl – if assertiveness is not performed through the correct channels, it becomes ‘annoying’ or ‘pushy’. Thus, we see the precariousness of balancing post-feminist expectations with traditional hetero-femininity that are required simultaneously to embody the new formation of ideal womanhood.

Graduate Perspectives: Other Girls

Elisa: (In)visible disability, individual effort, and resistance

Elisa responded to my announcement at UWA via email and added ‘some context’ to her expression of interest, stating:

Overall, I’d say school was a pretty negative experience for me, as I was often considered lazy and selfish for requesting special considerations related to my Ehlers-Danlos syndrome. My overwhelming take away from Ormond college was that, although it was an environment that was supposed to inspire independent young women, there was often a lot of favouritism and spitefulness on behalf of the staff, which completely undercut these ideals. I continue to see this first hand, as my mum is still currently a staff member at Ormond College.
Elisa’s story presents a unique perspective, by way of having a chronic genetic condition, she had to construct an identity positioned at odds with the school-endorsed all-rounder image. Unable to fulfil the expectations placed on white middle-class girls – like herself – to ‘have it all’ with their ‘perfect bodies and perfect achievements’ (Renold & Allan 2006, p. 459), Elisa’s experience of schooling at Ormond College was definitively negative.

According to the Ehler-Danlos Society website, Ehlers-Danlos syndrome (EDS) is an inherited connective tissue disorder that is ‘generally characterized by joint hypermobility (joints that stretch further than normal), skin hyperextensibility (skin that can be stretched further than normal), and tissue fragility’ (The Ehlers-Danlos Society 2018). The page emphasizes that EDS is individually experienced with some types expressing symptoms more visible than others. In Elisa’s case, she appears able-bodied with no distinctive abnormalities of skin or physicality, however, hypermobility of joints was one distinctive symptom she discussed. She was thus wary of physical activity at school, as it held the distinct possibility of serious injury. She describes one instance that punctuates her physical fragility, under circumstances most would consider truly nightmarish, she passed it off with an air of stoic nonchalance:

Quite a marked experience for me was: I dislocated both my shoulders on different occasions. The most prominent of which, was during one of my WACE exams. But, um, it was fine. I sort of got through it and finished the exam.

Following her shoulder dislocation, Elisa draws attention to the Othering she felt as a result of her condition, describing ‘this weird experience’:

So one girl who - very unfortunate – she was travelling and she broke her arm and she had to go to a foreign hospital, and she made a speech about it and everyone went, “Aw she’s a hero, she’s amazing. Like, she went through this,” – and I was some kind of clown for dislocating my shoulder during the WACE exam, like people thought it was really funny.
This account exemplifies how elite girls’ schools praise and reward ‘all-rounder’ attributes, namely the presentation of good global citizenship and the ability to rise above adversity. Though notably positioning some adversity as worthier than others. The (in)visible nature of Elisa’s EDS led her peers to view her condition as act, likened to a comedic performance, as Elisa explained: ‘It didn’t matter how many times I told them – [because] I just look like everyone else, they really weren’t going to take it seriously’.

Centrally, due to her condition, Elisa believed teachers saw her as ‘a liability’ and ‘lazy’. In line with a body of disabilities literature, such responses convey the prevalence of ableism in schools that marginalises individuals with disabilities (see Delicata 2016; Diez 2010; Zitzelsberger 2005). This misdirected assumption that her disability was simply due to a lack of individual effort, speaks to wider trends of individualism. As mentioned earlier, individual effort is a founding principal of the Australian meritocratic schooling system and the decentralisation of the education system that places increasing responsibility down the line from schools to teachers to parents to students. For Elisa, this was painfully clear:

I was seen to be an inconvenience or a bit of a liability so it was like, it was sort of seen as, “If you’d just tried a little bit harder, then we wouldn’t have to help you” and “You’re not giving it a fair go and you’re being lazy and you’re not meeting our expectations”.

This statement captures individualistic rhetoric that emphasizes one’s ability to overcome challenges by individual effort alone. This rhetoric systemically overlooks conditions (often structural oppressions) beyond the individual’s control, in this case – a medical condition. Harris (2004) notes that many women are socialised to see their failings as personal ones, however, Elisa could obviously delineate the objective limitations of her disability. She did not indicate ever feeling lesser than her peers, aided perhaps by her privilege and the subtlety of her condition. Elisa was not a ‘top girl’, though was capable academically and socially,
describing herself as a ‘quite a social person’ and a ‘lesser favourite’ in school. Nevertheless, students and teachers continually failed to grasp the nature of her unseen chronic illness. Her identity in turn presents an alternative femininity, in which she negotiated her ‘Othered’ social positioning by performing levels of resistance and ambivalence to the dominant hetero-feminine norms, seen in the de-emphasis she placed on her appearance, stating:

I was one of those girls, I never wore makeup to school – I didn’t give a damn, I had the biggest dress I could get away with because it was so comfortable! Stole it from the health centre, because we had this [supply], like when girls stained their dresses with period you go in and get [a spare dress]. So, I just picked the biggest one because it had been through the wash like fifty times!

The ways Elisa constructs her identity around being ‘low maintenance’ and ‘not giving a damn’ articulates her presentation of self through a disposition of defiance to dominant ‘girly-girl’ culture. Her unwillingness to ascribe to hetero-feminine beauty norms and concealment of her body in a baggy dress is a form of resistance to both the feminine standards of her schooling social field and dominant societal discourse that constructs disabled bodies as undesirable (Zitzelsberger 2005). Despite this resistance, her presentation in the focus group still embodied feminine beauty standards with long dark hair and feminine facial attractiveness according to a body of psychological studies already discussed (the display symmetry, large eyes and a small nose) (Little et al. 2011; Thornhill & Gangestad 1999; Cunningham 1986). Through her appearance as a good-looking, feminine-presenting, white young woman, she exists both inside and outside dominant ideals of womanhood due to the male gaze that views her body as both desirable and undesirable due to her condition. Through this ambivalent social positioning, she simultaneously resists and reinscribes feminine bodily standards.
Though she despised her schooling, Elisa nonetheless persevered towards academic success and subsequently gained acceptance into UWA, the highest-ranking university in Western Australia, thus progressing on a normative pathway of successful womanhood. When I asked where she saw herself in ten-to-twenty years’ time, she did not provide any substantial considerations, only that she wished to somehow spite her school by ambiguously becoming ‘really successful’ so Ormond College would want to claim her back, thus giving her the satisfaction of rejecting them. This proved to be more of a vindictive fantasy, however, and she noted that ‘it’s not feasible’. Elisa did not elaborate precisely why such “spiteful success” was not an option, neither did she offer any specific ambitions. Her imagined future, like most of the participants, projects a disinterest in forward-planning – despite socialisation within a schooling social field that strongly encourages self-motivation and commitment to elaborate planning towards exceptional careers.

**Gemma: Hetero-femininity and non-normative gender scripts**

Gemma graduated PGC seven years ago and currently lives in Canberra. Identifying as a lesbian, she sports short cropped hair, as she has done for a vast majority of her life – holding a general disdain for traditional hetero-feminine appearances. Despite being given all the advantages of the other white middle-class girls within this study, Gemma had quite a difficult home-life growing up. She expressed that she still deals with psychological trauma, both from home and school. Her home-life was characterised by her parent’s unhappy marriage, which ended when she was eleven years old, though she explained that her father remained largely absent throughout her life. Despite being highly competent in English and creative writing and clearly intelligent, Gemma refused to actively engage in areas that were not within her natural skillset and thus did not fulfil the all-rounder ideal. Overall, she found
school to be a negative experience and was bullied throughout primary and high school years, which she attributed to being ‘very opinionated’ and having a ‘tom-boy’ appearance.

She attended a public co-educational primary school until Year 5, where she then moved to PGC and remained for the rest of her education. When reflecting on the transition, Gemma stated, ‘I liked being around girls better. Like, I was kind of bullied and ostracised at primary school because I acted very boyish’. Gemma enjoyed PGC better, largely because ‘it just had more than a public school’ and she was able to make ‘actual friends quite quickly and formed a kind of pretentious kids outcast group’. When I asked Gemma what contributed to PGC being a negative experience for her, she stated:

> Within yourself, within your peer hierarchy and also within the school … you’re just getting pushed in a thousand directions and you don’t really know what to do. Plus you’re a teenager and you haven’t worked out how to cope with your emotions properly.

Gemma clashed with a number of teachers and students due to her outspoken nature. She stated how she would often argue with teachers when she thought things were wrong and believed she had a ‘strong sense of commentary on social issues very early’. Nonetheless, she felt the pressure to fit in. She recalled specifically:

> I would have those days where I’d get up in the morning and decide nothing’s going to phase me, to just keep quiet so I can get through the day … and I’d go home and feel like shit. And I just couldn’t. Every single time someone would like say something [homophobic] it was like nails on a chalk board.

Gemma’s outspoken nature led her to unexpectedly ‘come out’ in a Year 9 health class. The in-class exercise was to assess scenarios presented on flashcards, and in groups rate them as acceptable or unacceptable. Gemma recalled a card that described two men kissing at a party and one group in the class rating it as ‘unacceptable’, expressing that the men should ‘ask permission first’ to not make people feel uncomfortable. Gemma at the time was still figuring
out her sexuality but knew she ‘wasn’t feeling [attracted to men] as much as everyone else’. She recalled her response to the girls’ comments:

I just stood up and like snapped at them … “Well I’m bisexual and I find that really offensive” and I sat down and I was like, “Holy shit, what the fuck have I done”. Yeah, that was how I came out to the school … It came out in anger and it was just a bad moment.

Gemma felt health class was a distinct structural failing of the school in addressing the needs of non-heterosexualities, stating, ‘I think we really skirted around [LGBTQI concerns] in health, it was like – these people are gay but none of you are. Like, they exist but not here’. This highlights a commonly held assumption that children are unsexed or innately heterosexual, therefore the only way for schools to support innocent children is to encourage the fulfilment of ‘natural’ heterosexual identities (MacKinnon et al. 2017, p. 150).

Gemma felt she was socially ‘on the outskirts beforehand but worse when [she] came out as gay’, stating that ‘suddenly there was just like shit that I couldn’t do, like I couldn’t change in the locker room with everyone else’. She explained, ‘to come out as a lesbian [at an all-girls school] – girls automatically think that you’re into them for some reason. It’s very egocentric…’. Gemma reported often feeling threatened at PGC and said when young people now ask her about coming out at school she firmly advises them to ‘keep your mouth shut and wait till you’re out of school!’ She reasoned that ‘it’s about keeping safe’.

Regarding Gemma’s experience of traditional hetero-feminine norms at PGC, she recalled peers often commenting that she should ‘act like a girl’ and ‘grow her hair longer’, and in Year 8 she actually did grow her hair, though only for a short time – shaving it off for the Greatest Shave, cancer fundraiser. She stated,
I’ve always had my hair short. Like in the beginning of high school, people would be like, “Why don’t you grow your hair longer?” and I actually did grow my hair longer. But no one told me at the time that if you grow your hair longer you need someone to style it … And I cut it off pretty quickly.

Gemma felt the school maintained more oppressive forms of traditional femininity through limiting electives to cooking, sewing, and childcare, while the neighbouring elite boys’ school offered woodwork and philosophy. She stated:

It was very clear that what they wanted was obedience. So, their idea of a woman was someone who … is just a little bit further along the line of progressiveness … like they wanted us to get educations and get jobs, but it was still cooking and cleaning.

I asked Gemma whether she felt pressured to be a certain way by her peers and whether that was gendered, to which she responded:

Yeah, it was super gendered … It was really like, “Why won’t you act like a girl?”, “Why won’t you wear your hair longer?” or “Why won’t you wear dresses when we’re out?”, “Why aren’t you interested in talking about men and bags?”

Gemma highlights the ways students are instrumental in governing hetero-feminine ideal dispositions in this schooling context. Less concerned with classed ladylike dispositions promoted by the school, student social standards require hyper-femininity and being desirable and desiring of men. The pervasiveness of this ideal over time is further demonstrated in a statement made by Ali, who graduated four years after Gemma, stating:

There was a girl who everyone knew, who was two years below me and she never shaved her legs. And I think she got a pretty hard time because like, it was very thick. Like black, very visible. It was cringe-worthy.

Interestingly, Ali went on to reveal that some displays of alternative bodily practices were acceptable:
A: In our year group at [another elite girls’ school], for Mo-vember, they had girls who grew out their armpit hair … a few girls from our [school] year group did it. But then they sort of like kept going for many months and then they like still do now.

B: Did they get a hard time?

A: No, because I believe they were sort of like the cool group, so they made it trendy.

This shows how popularity affords girls the social capital to freely subvert hetero-feminine expectations to some extent, exempting them from being ‘cringe-worthy’ through merit of their social status. Gemma also noted that non-heterosexual identities could be made acceptable in certain circumstances – recalling a girl one year senior to her, Alex Carter, who was also openly gay and sported her hair in a short pixie cut:

She was out, and … she was popular … The way that I kind of explain it to myself is because Alex was useful to the school – like, she was so musically talented – she had a role within the school … so it’s a little bit of how useful are you to [the school] and how much are you willing to play the game. Which is to just keep silent and act the bit. And like, if you stir shit it doesn’t matter how useful you are to them.

Gemma perceives ‘usefulness’ as central to schooling success due to the school’s strong focus on image maintenance. Thus, difference is acceptable so long as you are talented in some manner and do not damage the school’s reputation. Her account provides astute insights into this schooling context by way of becoming a woman outside the dominant all-rounder ideal. However, her traumatic adolescence and general refusal to comply with dominant school expectations informs a highly cynical vision of PGC, which must be considered when analysing the data.

It is important to remember that these school processes are viewed through the lens of young women looking back on their school experiences. Thus, one must question how these girls read their school’s endeavours: What sorts of people do they believe it asks them to be? How
much of their experience is shaped by student interaction-versus-school interaction? And how does one begin to untangle the web of social understandings that these girls draw from multiple social fields beyond the educational institution? It is not the aim of this thesis to determine these girls’ true minds, merely to gather and analyse their self-narratives. Recent reflective graduate experiences are valuable in illuminating the emergent and ongoing gender norms that dialectically contribute to re-production of “successful” women in this schooling context.
Chapter Five: Success?
Analysing the paradoxical realities of young femininities

School Practice: The traditional-progressive paradox

Within the promotional image data-set explored earlier, one of the ways progressiveness is distinctly evident is in portrayals of post-feminist ‘girl-power’. The linguistic messages often play off notions of the new boundless possibilities for women and the school’s role in readying girls for a new era in women’s empowerment. Of course, there are some grounds for such claims, given the huge influx of women in education and the workforce over the last twenty odd years (Cuervo & Wyn 2011). Nonetheless, school rhetoric of feminist progressivism is framed paradoxically within themes of nostalgia and tradition. The intermingling of traditional and progressive values presents a prominent example of the schizoid double-pull in the elite girls’ schooling context. On one level, this paradox functions to bolster the school’s “eliteness”, and on another, it re-produces narrow representations of hetero-femininity that have historically restricted women’s freedom and empowerment. Many of the images within the sample display the duality of tradition and progress that has special significance in the elite girls’ schooling context. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the nature of late modern discursive shifts, tradition and enterprise combined as a vision are able to coalesce compatibly (Meadmore & Meadmore 2004, p. 377).

In the following section, I explore how schools enact the traditional-progressive paradox from the level of policy-making, administrative rhetoric, and curriculum. I chiefly draw on
PGC, due to a larger amount of data offering the most complete picture of changes undergone in recent years, namely, my 2017 interview with Amanda Cartwright. I refer to similarities in the other three schools featured to illuminate the commonality of gender norms experienced throughout this schooling social field. An important counterpart to examining school policies is exploring how students understand and experience them. I draw variously on participants’ self-narratives to create a fuller rendering of the elite girls’ schooling context.

*Inclusivity*

The earlier visual analysis of gendered representations in school promotional materials illuminates the paradoxical tension between traditional and progressive rhetoric. Elite image maintenance in the competitive educational market plays a central role in maintaining classed discourses of hetero-femininity in this schooling context. Yet changes are occurring, as elite schools attempt to create ideological narratives that present themselves as desirable to potential clientele in the late modern context (Drew 2013). Evidenced by PGC’s attempt to reflect the celebration of diversity occurring in wider society, captured in my interview with Amanda Cartwright, in which, she described how in the eight years of her Principalship at PGC, the school underwent inclusive ‘revitalisation’. She discussed several policies concerning diversity and inclusion, namely the introduction of a diversity statement – providing me with a copy of the document (see *figure 13* below).
Amanda claimed that her commitment to inclusive decision-making has contributed to a shift that is ‘now in that space where the community has come together so significantly that I can now position [the diversity statement] with strength’. She noted that the emergence of students ‘coming forth as lesbians’ and forming an LGTQI shout-out group, reflects this shift. The first organised openly queer group of its kind at PGC, Amanda felt that the group’s presence symbolised the development of a school ethos of inclusivity and acceptance that she believed was a product of her systematic investment in building a supportive school community and promoting diversity. She stated, ‘I am thrilled that they feel confident and comfortable to be who they are and feel safe to do so in our context!’

The societal processes of inclusivity are being felt across Western contexts. PGC’s diversity statement is a product of the school’s engagement with the more widespread celebration of sexual diversity and feminism emergent across the social fields of Western popular culture and politics. The most visible of these changes is Australia’s legalisation of same-sex marriage, which occurred on the 7th of December 2017, making Australia the twenty-sixth
country to implement this legislation (Koziol 2017). It cannot be denied that feminist action has redoubled in recent years - seen in the Women’s March and the ‘#MeToo’ movements of 2017. These wider societal trends speak to the recent proliferation of activism via social media (Linder et al. 2016). Simultaneously, these trends contribute to the official school discourse of ‘girl power’ and ‘diversity’ and the mainstreaming of queer and feminist activism in student cultures (Linder et al. 2016). Thus, we see a new set of social standards in acceptable womanhood (in combination with ongoing expectations of hetero-femininity) that young women engage with through their everyday practice.

*Girls’ Spaces*

In addition to the student-led LGBTQI club at PGC, the emergence of a similar student-led feminist ‘Gals’ club’ at St Joe’s further demonstrates the ways changes in societal values are reflected in the elite girls’ schooling social field. These clubs demonstrate the connection between progressive policies and the carving out of “girls’ spaces”. Whereby, students exercise autonomy to gather, politicise and discuss issues of importance to them concerning gender and sexuality, uniquely positioning themselves both outside of dominant cultural scrutiny, yet still within school bounds. Comparative to Driscoll’s (1999) study on “cyber-girls,” which examined the girls’ spaces of young feminist online blogs, these clubs attempt to operationalise a ‘Do-It-Yourself’ young feminism with ‘an ambivalence measured by their reliance on the systems they critique to produce and articulate their communities and their politics’ (Driscoll 1999, p. 188). Consequently, the club’s location within this schooling social field engenders gradual indoctrination into dominant school discourses, re-produced into another platform on which to perform the dominant all-rounder ideal. This rearticulation is demonstrated, firstly, through the school enforcing a name-change from ‘Feminist Club’ to ‘Gals’ Club’, and secondly through the introduction of official school badges.
St Joe’s refusal to accept a more overt signification of women’s empowerment as a club name illuminates the ways this schooling context, like broader society, attempts to regulate and reduce young women’s experiences to a more marketable symbolic value. As Charles (2013) notes, the term ‘gal’ signifies the ‘sassy, sexy, lip-gloss wearing young female now ubiquitous in mainstream popular culture’ (p. 81). Indeed, teenage girl activists remain largely overlooked in both public and academic spheres, appearing only sporadically – ‘as visual objects rather than as intelligent and intelligible political subjects’ (Taft 2011, p. 5).

This is linked to the schizoid tensions between young teen activism and girlhood, as Jessica Taft (2011) highlights: ‘at the conceptual centre of this [is a] series of oppositions between ‘girl identity and activist identity’ (superficial/serious, mean/supportive, insecure/confident)’ (p. 88).

The Gal’s club was further indoctrinated through the introduction of badges, signifying the elite meritorious culture of success that relies on ‘displays of approval and social honour’ (Kenway 1990, p. 155). Combined with the club’s fulfilment of such all-rounder ideals as independence and responsible citizenship, the latest iteration of the Gal’s Club distinctly reinforces the dominant school discourse of successful womanhood. Nonetheless, the club represents an important example of young women’s structured agency in the ongoing practice of negotiating feminist politics within the elite girls’ schooling context. The ways students resist or rearticulate social processes are crucial to understanding the dialectical nature of becoming woman in this schooling context.
Do progressive policies produce new femininities?

“They want [us] to come out [of school] and if there are barriers be like, ‘Actually no! I’m going to step over that!’” – Pia, PGC

Today, within the late modern context of destabilized gender relations and rapid change, elite girls’ schools continue to present themselves as leaders in education and feminist progressivism, but is this so? The following section explores how gender norms are reproduced through progressive policies by drawing on two prominent examples: PGC’s Institute of Leadership Education and the promotion of STEM subjects.

**Leadership and Soft Skills**

In their exploration of the ‘paradoxical failures of success’ in three elite girls’ schooling contexts (Australia, England, and South Africa), Kenway, Epstein and Langmead (2015) show that the expectation across all schools is for students to learn to lead and be well prepared for their future positions of impact and influence; however, who and what they are expected to lead remains unclear. Upon receiving education at top universities, their intended work will be of the sort considered respectable for girls of their class, namely the ‘higher-order professions’, including: business (family or their own), finance and senior management or management consultancy, law, medicine, leading roles in culture, creative and fashion industries, the senior public services, politics or diplomatic posts (Kenway et al. 2015, p. 155). The authors question, ‘how well prepared are these girls for contemporary and future workplaces, let alone leading them’? They argue that the ‘hothouse environments’ in which girls are so attentively groomed for ‘success’ are oppressive and may be doing them a disservice (p. 155).
Beyond the utopian, liberal, ‘faux-feminist’ cocoon of school, girls are built up to expect greatness yet are ill-prepared for the male resistance they are likely to experience in the corporate workplace (Kenway et al. 2015, p. 158). The reality, as aforementioned, is that it is extremely unlikely girls will go on to careers in the top echelons of the national or global elite (Slaughter 2012). Drawing on Rothkopf (2008), women are distinctly underrepresented in the global elite, comprising less than 0.07 per cent of the ruling, hyper-wealthy 1 per cent (Rothkopf 2008, p. 289). The below image (see figure 14) of the World Economic Forum (2005), also known as the ‘Davos Man’, makes it abundantly clear that the golden rule to membership in the ‘super-class’ is ‘be born a man’ (Rothkopf 2008, p. 289).

![Figure 14: World Economic Forum, January 2005 [From left: Bill Clinton, Bill Gates, Thabo Mbeki, Tony Blair, Bono, Olusegun Obasanjo] (Chainey 2018)](image)

It is interesting to note, however, that the 2018 Davos Man featured the first all-female panel of co-chairs (Chainey 2018). Whether this is a sign of progress or a clever PR move, or both, women continue to be vastly underrepresented in positions of power (particularly world politics). In line with Hutchings et al. (2012), it is likely that ingrained gendered perceptions of expertise and ability continue to stunt women’s opportunities in the current globalized...
world of work. Among my participants, three expressed interest in working overseas and certainly, numerous more women from elite schooling will take up entry-level positions in global elite occupations. Yet, as Kenway *et al.* (2015) note, within work that increasingly requires global mobility, women are subject to discrimination in selection for global assignments, with cited barriers including: work-family conflicts, perceived lack of interest, enduring corporate resistance, and complications linked to prejudice in foreign locations (p. 158).

Accordingly, elite girls’ schools are arguably ineffective at equipping girls for the conditions of the workforce. The schools’ use of vague apolitical and post-feminist discourses, such as ‘global connectedness’ and ‘perpetual flourishing’ (*see figures 15 and 15.1 below*), do little to address the challenges of gendered prejudice young women are likely to face.

*Figure 15 (Left: ‘Diversity’) & Figure 15.1 (Right: ‘Flourishing’)*:

Photographs I took, with permission, of banners at PGC (18th August 2017).

One notable example that demonstrates this somewhat superficial preparation of new can-do femininities is the introduction of the ITE at PGC. Marketed as a means of empowering young women, the program promotes the individual pursuit of ‘successful global citizenship, service, and communication skills’ (PGC School Website 2018). These aims, in addition to
Amanda’s conceptualisation of leadership as ‘self-regulation’ and ‘emotional-regulation’, encapsulates the paradoxical maxims of the can-do girl already discussed. Qualities of self-regulation, such as commitment, dedication and competence, are all basic forms of cultural capital required for global elite careers, of which these schools are certainly effective in producing through their competitive and rigorous curriculum. So, too, are qualities of emotional-regulation increasingly in demand in such globally oriented workplaces (Kenway et al. 2015, p. 156). As evidenced in my visual analysis, girls’ schools claim to specialize in emotional competence through the ‘soft skills’ of collaboration and communication. This conception of leadership as team-oriented invokes the need for emotional capital in current globalizing conditions and reinstates notions of selfless feminine virtues, ‘for the betterment of other people’ – as Amanda put it in her interview with me.

It is important to draw a distinction between emotional labour and emotional capital. The former pertains to certain daily performances of emotion by workers (Andrew 2015). Such emotional regulation remains women’s (unpaid) work, as Hochschild notes in her landmark works (1979; 1983): emotional labour is fundamental to many jobs predominantly held by women (childcare; teaching; nursing). Emotions are produced and enacted within a structure of power relations, and thus reflect inequalities of class, race and gender – with the least powerful within society bearing the brunt of the most negative emotions (Andrew 2015, p. 653). Comparatively, emotional capital comprises ‘the skills and dispositions that may become embodied through practice of [particular] performances of emotional labour’ (Andrew 2015, p. 653). Despite the assumption that emotional capital is naturalised through women’s biological predisposition, relevant scholarship points out that emotional capital is not simply felt or performed, but is an embodied and accumulated resource (Andrew 2015;
Reay 2000). Hence, this resource can benefit both the recipients of the labour and those supplying it.

Emotional capital is cultivated and prized in the ‘grooming-for-the-global’ curriculum of elite girls’ schools (Kenway et al. 2015). It is evident in schools’ emphasis on soft skills, extensive language programs, and opportunities for international travel to develop cross-cultural awareness and international mindedness. Despite such programs, the social segregation and exclusive practices of these schooling fields, overwhelmingly comprised of children from white middle-upper class families, provides girls with minimal conception of their broader social context, as noted by Annabelle – who attended a public co-educational school through to pre-primary (which is not very long, two years at the most), saying:

I wish I went to a co-ed primary school … I wish I had stayed for a little bit longer, just to have a taste of, like, different people and different kinds of groups, like socio-economic groups.

This absence of ‘plurality and multi-vocality’ (Bauman 2000, p. 99) is at odds with the expectation that these schools produce the ideal can-do girl, which Kenway et al. (2015) describes in terms of the production of:

Classy cosmopolitans who can skate, with effortless efficiency, across the privileged surfaces of their working worlds and who can engage with total ease and grace their counterparts from other cultures and locations. (p. 156)

Recalling the central questions of this study, concerned with how progressive administrative rhetoric disseminates through the schooling social field – I draw on Pia’s account. As a PGC 2016 prefect, Pia’s perspective helps to show how school rhetoric comes to be understood and internalised by the young women that inhabit this social space. Her role as prefect,
discussed at some length in the previous chapter, represents a unique positioning between the common student experience and school policy-making – self-described as ‘being kind of behind the scenes’. From this privileged standpoint, Pia experienced the ILE in the program’s first year of operation and perceived Cartwright’s motivation for creating the Institute as largely for positive public recognition. As mentioned earlier, she describes it as ‘the most retarded stuff – just so you could get a certain amount of points that led to you getting [a leadership certificate] … So, it was like traveling overseas, joining the bands [and so on].’ Pia’s sceptical statement presents a student view of the project (at its earliest stage): seen as a largely superficial, ‘retarded’ means of promoting the school’s image as an elite producer of can-do girls. What she means precisely by ‘retarded’ in this context is difficult to analyse with precision, however, it seems to imply random or irrelevant activities.

Pia’s description of the ILE demonstrates how the school systematically rewards those who best perform maxims of the all-rounder ideal: that is, grooming-for-the-global (Kenway et al. 2015) through cross-cultural engagement. Additionally, the program’s points-based system that awards participation in the widest range of areas operates to instil value-addedness and the self-project (Meadmore & Meadmore 2004). Unmentioned by Pia, is the promotion of community service in accumulation of emotional capital and production of classed feminine virtues, those “becoming of a young lady”. From a broader educational perspective, the growth of educational initiatives, such as the ILE, operates to aid wealthy students and their families to ‘exploit and strategically pursue economic and cultural capital’ (Doherty, Mu & Shield 2009, p. 760). This effectively bolsters the dominant ideal of a middle-class can-do girl and raises the bar of success even further beyond the reach of less advantaged girls. Of course, there are limitations to determining the value of the ILE through the way it is described here, via Pia’s rather jaundiced view.
**STEM**

From their inception, Western Australian elite girls’ schools have offered the traditionally masculine topics of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (referred to as STEM subjects), alongside the feminine ‘soft sciences’ of English, Geography, History, Home-economics, and Music (Miles 1987). Despite the current push for girls to take up male-dominated ‘hard science’ careers, few young women pursue STEM topics into tertiary education (see OECD 2015). This is a pertinent example of girls’ enduring gendered habitus that unconsciously manifests as a lack of interest or self-belief within these disciplines, despite modernizing forces. This is illustrated by Bourdieu’s assertion that ‘the habitus continues long after the objective conditions of its emergence have been dislodged’ (McNay 1999, p. 103). This also corresponds with the schizoid push-pull of recent shifts in gender relations, characterised by destabilizing norms on one level and the simultaneous further entrenchment of conventional behaviour on other levels.

As Krais (2006, p. 121) notes, ‘the gender-specificity of the habitus is among the fundamental elements of a person’s identity’ – it internalizes and embodies the gender division of labour and shapes an individual from the moment of birth. Historically ingrained hierarchical gender relations are deeply embedded in bodily *hexis* and continue to have a powerful effect on young women’s habitual and taken-for-granted ways of seeing the world (Krais 2006). From a broader global perspective, I draw on a 2012 report concerning gender equality in education conducted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), comprised of 34 democratic nations. The findings reveal that despite many countries successfully closing gender gaps in learning outcomes, boys’ and girls’ attitudes towards learning and their aspirations for the future are markedly different, which has a significant impact on future education and career paths (OECD 2015, p. 3).
Indeed, only 14 per cent of young women entering university for the first time within the OECD countries chose science-related fields compared to 39 per cent of young men, indicating long-held gendered beliefs about ability (Thomson 2018). This corresponds with figures 16 and 16.1 that show gender differences of student self-concept in mathematics and science. Low self-confidence and self-efficacy in these areas are consistently shown among girls, even those who perform as well as boys. The question remains, how significant is the link between self-confidence and performance? The report shows a substantial disparity in scores based on student’s self-efficacy in mathematics and science – the equivalent of one year (49 score points) and six months (37 score points) of school respectively (OECD 2015, p. 71).

![Figure 16: Gender differences in mathematics across OECD countries (OECD 2015)](#)
Leading Ladies

Analysing paradoxical femininities

The above statistics demonstrate the notable depth and breadth of traditional gender roles in shaping young women’s gendered habitus across the world. Moreover, high levels of anxiety, particularly towards mathematics among girls, are shown on average across OECD countries to be associated with a decline in academic performance equivalent to almost one year of school (34 score points) (OECD 2015, p. 77). Interestingly, the gap in scores is even larger among high achievers (OECD 2015, p. 77). Given the expectations of normative excellence within the elite girls’ schooling context, the stress and anxiety to perform in STEM subjects may thus prove potentially more damaging to girls’ self-concept and the likelihood of their continuation in university. Somewhat surprisingly, tentative evidence suggests elite girls’ schools produce more self-confidence and higher enrolment in STEM topics than their co-educational counterparts (see Forgasz & Leder 2017; Sax et al. 2009). Indeed, elite girls’ schools commonly promote themselves with claims of sophisticated STEM learning

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7 Due to innumerable contextual factors, such as socio-educational index, location, clientele background, teaching practices and facilities, it is difficult to make any broad assertions about educational outcomes of elite girls’ schooling in comparison to co-educational elite schools, let alone those in other sectors.
programs, evidenced in figure 17 on SCLC’s school website that details a ‘deliberate and intentional … shared vision for STEM’, accompanied with the slogan ‘stem for the future’, seen below:

![Stem for the future](image)

*Figure 17: Promotion of STEM learning, screenshot taken from SCLC school website (17th January 2019).*

Out of the ten graduates interviewed, however, none currently major in STEM subjects at university. Of course, this small sample is by no means representative, particularly given that four participants were recruited via announcement at an anthropology and sociology lecture, affecting a recruitment bias for arts students. Nonetheless, their perspectives and motivations add some small qualitative detailing to the rift between the schools’ public image and girls’ schooling outcomes and experiences. As previously indicated in the St Joe’s girls’ conversation, they perceived a definite ‘push’ towards STEM disciplines in Career Education, with the rhetoric that “we need women in these fields”, to the neglect of any other – particularly the arts.
Ambivalence towards high-profile or STEM careers was the overall sentiment conveyed in participants’ imagined futures. All girls were more concerned with finding a career relevant to their interests, or “finding themselves” through travel and exploration – in a manner only privileged young people in globalised conditions can. The manifestation of girls’ ambitions on a broader scale was noted in the OECD report (2015) from findings on a 2006 PISA study conducted on fifteen-year-old students, which indicated girls held more ambitious career expectations than boys across almost all countries and economies that participated. On average, girls were eleven per cent more likely than boys to expect work as legislators, senior officials, managers and professionals (OECD 2015, p. 110). Consequently, data from the corresponding cohort of young adults in 2012 revealed that young women experienced more acute disappointment upon entering university and careers (OECD 2015). Further, many young women still expected to obtain careers in nursing, midwifery, teaching, veterinary science, childcare and psychology – which the report referred to as “nurturance-oriented” careers (OECD 2015, p. 115). Thus, we see how traditional feminine values remain embedded in the claims and expectations of young women across numerous democratic contexts, in which, girls are socially conditioned to make sacrifices for family and to be more inclined towards traditionally feminine career paths. Nonetheless, they expect more from schooling outcomes and thus experience a deflation of ambitions upon entering adulthood. The ongoing double conformity of elite girls’ schools’ promotion of both soft skills and STEM subjects further compounds the conflicting expectations of successful womanhood and from these accounts, show limited success in production of their desired outcomes.
Do traditional policies re-produce old femininities?

The following section addresses the question of how traditional hetero-feminine norms are reproduced in the elite girls’ schooling context by exploring the ways traditional uniform and etiquette policies are implemented by schools and experienced by former students.

**Etiquette**

In contrast to the ‘progressive’ policies above, the perseverance of traditional classed feminine values is notably evidenced in Pia’s interview, in which she describes an etiquette workshop conducted for her year group in preparation for their school ball. As earlier noted, she recalls the ‘really weird’ experience of having ‘a lady come in and talk about courtesy at a ball’.

The data reveals a distinct continuity in the re-production of respectable ladylike dispositions through neat presentation, modesty and manners. These operate as markers of class distinction and, as the earlier chapter on the history of girls’ schooling illuminates, also increase eligibility towards finding a distinguished husband. The continuity of women’s education as institutions for the accomplishments aimed towards appropriate in-class marriage is still evident in these student accounts. While feminine ideals have recently evolved for girls in the elite single-sex schooling context, the ‘ladylike’ discourse has an enduring presence in their lives.

In exploring the significance of these ongoing ladylike norms, I refer again to Alexandra Allan’s (2009) study. As discussed earlier, Allan argues that there is currently a resurgence of interest in ‘lady-like’ conduct, evidenced in the emergence of ‘new’ etiquette guides for young women. Just last year in regional Victoria, Australia, an elite co-educational, independent school received criticism for conducting ‘deportment and presentation’
workshops that included high heel walking practice for female students (Corsetti 2017, ABC News). There were mixed responses from parents and students with many complaining on the grounds of sexism and ‘a waste of resources’ and others supporting the course as positive towards building girls’ confidence and promoting the importance of ‘posture and body language’ in preparation for professional settings (Corsetti 2017). This mixed criticism is itself a poignant indicator of the merging of old and new standards of womanhood and the schizoid conditions that engender ambivalent subject positioning.

This resurgence of ladylike behaviour and etiquette guides exemplify the contradictory mingling of traditional and contemporary values, differing from earlier iterations through the infusion of ‘having it all’, a notion more attuned to late modern life. As Allan notes, current courses for girls seek to teach them not only how to sew but also how to engage in self-defence (Allan 2009, p. 147) – or in this instance, how to walk in heels and kick ass in the boardroom, so to speak. Despite changes in gendered divisions of labour, girls are now expected to seek successful careers while simultaneously performing within normative pathways of femininity (Charles 2013).

This resurgence is attributed to the above-mentioned ‘cultural fascination with girlhood and the market value of young women’ (Harris 2004, p. 34) as well as the concerted cultivation of young women as the ideal subjects of the new economy. Thus, we see another marketised use of post-feminist girl-power and the neo-liberal ‘DIY’ mentality to shape girls’ bodies towards ideal womanhood. Many emergent programs and texts claim that they can help girls achieve their dreams – if only they buy the products, act in the correct ways, and comport themselves with confidence and girly-flare. These discourses are shown to glaze over the persisting and potentially increasing inequalities produced by class and race stratifications in current times. This embodies the prevalence of classed and gendered discourses in contemporary society as
well as the pull of hyper-femininity in response to the push of mainstreamed acceptance to androgyny and non-binary sexualities (Allan 2009; Charles 2013; Braidotti 2006).

**Dress Code and Conservatism**

While principal leadership has been shown to have significant implications on the schooling climate, the backlash resulting from the PGC uniform change, involving the incorporation of purple, highlights the significant role key stakeholders (alumni, local community and parents) play in shaping young women’s gendered practices. As noted by Gemma, ‘[Local] suburbs people are crazy and also well-connected, so when they have a problem with something they can make it into a huge thing’. Amanda noted several incidents of criticism received from the local community that signify the external maintenance of traditional forms of femininity; such as, the accusation in a local newspaper of Amanda being a “repressed lesbian” due to the incorporation of purple into the uniform, and having a parent meet with the deputy to ask, “What is all this women’s business? What is all this talk about women [and feminism]?”.

These local responses to feminist representations exemplify the liberal-conservative political social fields in which these schools are situated – with the Australian Electoral Division, which encompasses these schools and their affluent surrounding suburbs, comfortably being held by a Liberal or conservative independent for over fifty years (AEC 2018).

Kathy suggested that external forces, such as parental influence and social media, play a larger part in influencing girl’s ideas of gender roles and sexual identity than the PGC school ethos. This statement isn’t unfounded; there is a large body of research denoting the influence of popular culture and media in influencing how girls negotiate gender and sexuality (see Charles 2013; McRobbie 2004a).

It is worth pointing out that PGC’s uniform change minimally altered the traditional feminine
styles, merely introduced another colour to their colour scheme, as evidence in *figure 18* below, depicting an image drawn from the PGC Uniform Lookbook that unveiled the new uniforms, entitled ‘Dressed for Success’:

![Figure 18: Winter Uniforms in ‘PGC Uniform Lookbook: Dressed for Success’](accessed 1st November 2017)

Here we see the typical social aesthetics of an elite girls’ schooling social field, as explored in the visual analysis. From ribbons to modest skirts, this uniform operates to uphold traditional standards of upper-middle-class femininity. The Lookbook denotes, ‘these sophisticated garments will adorn our students as we move forward into the next phase of the evolution of our school’. This claim of school transformation is not forthcoming through the dress code, however, presenting only slight alterations to highly traditional styles, namely the introduction of pinstripes, a purple cardigan, black instead of brown shoes, and smocks for the junior students that appear to actually be more traditional than their former dresses.
The upkeep of strict dress code is an obvious indication of traditional school policies, signifying the aesthetic embodiment of resistance to change and class conservatism. Participants were largely critical of their school’s use of traditional ladylike tropes, most prominently described through the continuation of strict traditional feminine uniform. Uniform is central to the everyday mundane bodily practices that reinscribe older more oppressive gender norms and form the internalised dispositions of students as social agents. As Drewicz Ewing notes, ‘Student bodies receive messages directly through the wording of dress codes about how they should appear and perform, yet also how they should not appear and perform’ (Drewicz Ewing 2014, p. 71). This results in the embodiment of proper feminine dispositions as defined through the boundaries of improper feminine dispositions. In both popular culture and elite girls’ schooling dress codes, not just any body ‘will do’ (Bordo 1993). As McRobbie (2000) notes, ‘slim blondness’ is a defining characteristic of the desirable female body, that includes, able-bodied, white, feminine and heteronormative (p. 198).

Drawing on David MacDougall’s Bourdiesian conception of the social aesthetic field in elite schooling:

    School uniforms become not only indicative of social relationships but also a way of controlling, concealing and exhibiting the human body, reflecting correspondingly complex motives in those who institute them (MacDougall 2000, p. 13).

Here, MacDougall highlights the significance of uniform as a tool of institutional domination in shaping bodily praxis. Further, the distinctive modest and ‘classy’ school uniform also operates to distanciate elite girls from other girls. The taken-for-granted expectation of middle-class career trajectories expressed through aesthetics is evident in the St Joe’s girls’ conversation about dress code, with consensus that looking ‘messy’ was detrimental to the
school’s reputation and one’s own future career prospects. Regarding strict skirt length and neatness policies, Esther commented, ‘you’ve got to present yourself well, it’s like presenting yourself in the workplace’. This denotes an underlying assumption, that the workplace entails formal office-wear as opposed to blue-collar outdoor clothing, or dress codes for hospitality. The social surroundings of these middle-class girls shape their imagined futures, underpinned by normative classed notions that exclude the possibility of working-class jobs (Tsao, Hardy & Lingard 2018).

The traditional feminine styles of the uniform are upheld by schools, parents and students alike, consisting of compulsory skirts and dresses and – to the discomfort of many – students are not permitted to wear pants outside of physical education. The student perspectives regarding uniform were very much, as Jenny put it, ‘love-hate’. Several girls expressed annoyance at being prevented from wearing pants in winter when stockings were insufficient at keeping out the cold and lamented that the flimsy summer dresses were often impractical: riding up from a school bag or billowing scandalously in the wind. Yet, these comments were equally countered with expressions of appreciation for the neat and ‘put together’ look that it projected.

This is in light of many public schools across Australia making policy changes to provide girls with the option to wear pants. Some schools – such as a primary school in New Zealand pictured in figure 19 below – have even created new gender neutral policies, including a complete unisex uniform with a kilt offered for boys and girls. This follows in the footsteps of approximately eighty state British schools (Roberts 2017; Yeung 2016).
In Western Australia, the State’s student dress code policy was only recently (September 2017) overhauled to ensure it was “non-discriminatory”, upon receiving a heartfelt plea from an 11-year-old-girl (Ballantyne 2017). As a result, state schools are no longer allowed to limit girls to wearing only dresses, skirt or skorts. However, this does not apply to Catholic or Private schools. Kathy’s statement that she did not foresee any uniform changes addressing the traditional gendered style, captures the firm stance of many elite, private girls’ schools. Further, her justification that essentially “rules is rules” and failure to comply with group rules will inhibit your success in entering the labour market reinforces, deemphasizes traditional gender norms while simultaneously emphasizing the school as a training ground for girls to be the diligent and unquestioning workforce that late modern economies are heavily reliant on (McRobbie 2000). Focus on professional success is claimed to be the overarching driver of these policies, which overlooks the impact that traditional feminine day-to-day practices have on student’s gendered practices. Furthermore, this vision of

Figure 19: School children displaying new unisex uniform (Hayward in Roberts 2017)
professional success also ignores the fact that women in most office places frequently wear trousers, shirts, and other gender-neutral garments.

Across the Australian girls’ school ethos, despite some successes in Victorian schools and rising pressure from parents turning to the Anti-Discrimination Commission, the striation of classed respectability through gendered traditional uniform remains firmly in place (Kleyn 2019). Indeed, any deviations are marked by resistance, as evidenced in a uniform change made by PGC under Amanda’s leadership.

From the student perspective, while some girls believed that their schools were ‘trying’ to be more progressive in their uniform policies, there was general consensus that this was often done in a superfluous manner. For instance, Gemma scathingly pointed out that PGC’s incorporation of purple ‘was not focusing on the deeper issues there,’ sarcastically jibing, ‘Purple… yeah it really fixed everything.’ Her justification was that ‘it’s very ‘white middle-class woman’ feminism – there isn’t anything much deeper about race or sexuality or respect to sexual feminism’. This is an astute observation, however, given that Gemma left only after the first couple years of Amanda’s involvement in the school – it is interesting to note how Amanda did attempt to make more tangible differences beyond symbolic aesthetics of feminism as seen through the diversity statement and the ITE.
Student Practice: Ambivalence, all-rounders & alternate femininities

My central focus in this section, is to delineate how the social re-production of the all-rounder ideal takes shape in young women’s lives, an objective best achieved through exploring the extremes: those who most embody the ideal and those on the outskirts. Accordingly, I dedicate most of the following sections to Pia, the archetypal all-rounder, and to Gemma, the outsider, strongly resistant to dominant gender norms.

The graduate self-narratives give form to the perimeters of acceptable womanhood, revealing certain ways young women exercise resistance and autonomy through ambivalent social positioning. Thus, they show us how students may simultaneously work within and transgress the normative boundaries of “doing girl” and “doing success” (Renold & Allan 2006, p. 470). Clear signs of Bourdieu’s ‘divided habitus’ (Bourdieu 1999, p. 511) emerged across all graduate interviews and focus groups, as I will show. Before continuing, however, it is important to consider the schooling experience of the average student – given that, by definition, this represents a majority of girls’ experiences. Thus, I will briefly explore Jenny’s schooling experience to give some concept of the social spaces girls can and do carve out between the extremes. Here, I return to the following statement made by Jenny:

Whatever happens in my future I feel confident in my abilities and I feel that’s partly because I was not the mould of the perfect student, like I had my own independence and support in that environment.

This comment offers an important insight into how these schools possess a wider range of abilities and identities than their public image suggests. Such identities can, in fact, flourish – so long as the types of resistance girls express (whether through choice or not) are still performed predominantly within the larger schema of the all-rounder girl ideal. While this framework demarcates notably narrow boundaries of acceptable womanhood (white, hetero-
feminine, able-bodied), it incorporates certain degrees of reflexivity, characteristic of late modernity. Jenny recognised that she was never going to be an all-rounder girl, as she lacked prowess in physical education and was not the most confident or popular girl in her year group, nonetheless, she kept up decent grades, formed strong relationships with some teachers and peers, and participated in a range of co-curricular activities, such as playing in the school orchestra. Jenny demonstrated grace in her self-assured embodiment of what most of us must come to terms with sooner or later – being average. This is somewhat remarkable, given how actively elite girls’ schools employ rhetoric that constructs every student as exceptional and above-average (Kenway 1990). As Kenway (1990) argues, this school ethos engenders the belief that ‘being part of a wealthy school and wealthy family naturally means that you will ‘aim high’ and ‘do well’” (p. 140, emphasis in original). Jenny clearly felt the weight of high expectations, evidenced in a comment she made about the plethora of “motivational” assemblies that showcased former high-achieving students. In spite of this, she protested, ‘Why can’t I be happy at 70 per cent? Why do I have to be happy only for the 90 per cent?’ Here we see that Jenny’s sense of self-worth is not hinged on her ability (or inability) to fulfil the ideal of academic excellence. Through her high levels of accumulated cultural capital, Jenny shows impunity to the school’s dominant feminine ideals, which so often polarise girls as either successes or failures.

Notably, Jenny started attending SCLC at the earliest possible stage – kindergarten. As discussed in my conceptual framework, Bourdieu postulates that the earlier an agent enters a field – the greater their accumulated cultural capital, offering the social agent an advanced ‘feel for the game,’ that has been internalised and abided by over prolonged time periods (Bourdieu 1990, p. 67). Jenny, along with Esther and Megan from the St Joe’s focus group, enrolled into their respective schools at the earliest possible stage – and all expressed positive feelings towards school. Jenny reported remarkably strong and supportive connections with
her teachers. Bourdieu notes that teachers have a significant position in the schooling social field due to their ability to reward certain students with cultural capital, as I will discuss further later in the chapter. These practices of accumulation help to prevent Jenny’s social positioning from being challenged, affording her greater security and autonomy.

Many girls, like Jenny, express forms of resistance to gender norms yet still perform within the larger schema of all-rounder girl ideals – at least to some extent. Thus, resistance is incorporated into the framework of the all-rounder girl. This shows that contradictions do not weaken the influence of the dominant all-rounder discourse within the elite girls’ schooling social field - rather they contribute to the tensions already inbuilt into the formation of femininity, internalised into the divided habitus of students.

**Pia: all-rounder ambivalence and gender issues beyond “the bubble”**

Pia’s self-narrative shows a degree of ambivalence that is reflected by a majority of the interviewees as they seek to make sense of their personal aspirations beyond the high expectations of their former schools. Ambivalence punctuates Pia’s somewhat subdued view of her future – a recognition that she is not particularly ‘special’, despite her schools’ abundant rhetoric that she and her peers could all ‘be somebody’ (glamorous high-profile career-women). As Gonick (2000) notes, the late modern entrepreneurial imperative to ‘become somebody’ is a near impossible feat, exposing ‘the delusionary character of self-determining, individualistic and autonomous ideas of subjectivity (p. 254). Pia’s perspective illuminates the contradictions between self-identification, social positioning, possible identities, and the uncertain transition between them. This ambivalence, as described earlier, is a discursive space defined by ambiguity between identity classifications (Bauman 2001).
**All-rounder ambivalence**

Bauman postulates that such a discursive positioning between opposing discourses causes anxiety and pain to the subject from failure to become the unitary autonomous subject (the all-rounder girl) (Walkerdine 2003). However, Pia’s lived experience demonstrates greater nuances in ambivalent identity positioning, insomuch as she performed the all-rounder girl in school, yet her current critical retrospection reveals a distancing from normative narratives of successful womanhood – though not an outright rejection. Negotiating the contradictions within definitions of successful womanhood is particularly pertinent for young women in the move from elite girls’ schooling to university, due to a disjuncture that occurs between what was expected in one social field and what is achievable beyond it. Embodying the successful late modern woman does not appear to be a very tempting or realistic position for many of the young women I interviewed. Previous studies indicate that negotiating such high expectations may be a source of anxiety for some (see Renold & Allan 2006; Gordon et al. 2005), as seen in a comment made by Caitlin:

> It’s interesting looking back, like wow it’s so stressful … But you come out with all these great values. You come out and you’re alive and well and while you’re in there it’s very like, “phew!” [stressed gesture]

Pia quipped that she was under the impression her role as prefect would improve her work credentials, yet has subsequently discovered that ‘no one gives a shit!’ This incredulity about her prestigious prefect role lacking value outside of school and into the workforce suggests a belief that the cultural capital accumulated in school did not transfer beyond its social field. It is apparent she now has neither the mind nor motivation to pursue the ambitious can-do trajectory she once aspired to in school. The contrast in her current ambivalence and former fixed positioning was evidenced from her outset self-description:
I’m kind of becoming a bit more of a relaxed do-what-I-want-to-do kind of person. I think I’ve always been very morally concerned about making sure I’m doing the right thing by everyone before myself, making sure I’m always striving to do something.

This description of her former character in school, centred on morals, service and striving, is markedly akin to the school values, evidenced in excerpts from the school website:

‘equipping our girls to make positive contributions to their communities,’ and their motto, ‘strive to the peaks’ (Accessed 17th January 2019). This similarity is indicative of how students come to embody the doxa of their schooling social field. As reported earlier, Pia elaborated on her former positioning as somewhat authoritarian, saying she viewed the ‘suffocating’ environment as ‘kind of necessary – Lord of the Flies kind of shit’

Two years beyond the schooling social field has led Pia to feel ‘more womanly than [she’s] ever felt’ and more cynical besides. Disillusionment has led to a shrinking of possibilities, expressed through uncertainty about her career prospects. To the question of where she saw herself in 10 to 20 years’ time, as mentioned earlier, she responded: ‘If I’m being completely honest, I genuinely think I have no idea’. She then endeavoured to respond, ‘for the purpose of this’ and described plans to use her degree in international relations, specialising in Chinese agricultural trade, but mused that she may not like it and could later decide to do something ‘more chilled’.

How is the elite girls’ schooling social field implicated in this deflation of drive upon graduation, despite the schools’ clear objectives to produce ideal professional women? One possible explanation is that in a classroom environment devoid of the opposite sex, girls are perhaps better able to envision a world in which the patriarchal social order is inverted and women are the dominant gender (Scioli 2015, p. 55). However, upon leaving ‘the bubble,’ as Pia termed her school social field, girls become disenchanted as they adapt to almost unconscious modes of social and cultural domination that occur through everyday
interactions within the social hierarchies of mixed-gender institutions, namely in university and the workplace (Bourdieu 1979). However, this theory does not account for the subtle forms of symbolic domination that occur even within an all-girls schooling social field. This is because no institution or individual in Western society can exist in isolation to dominant patriarchal power structures.

Gender issues beyond the bubble

A longitudinal survey conducted by the Australian Council of Educational Research (ACER) suggests that despite girls’ overall higher retention and achievement rates over boys in Australian schools, gender is identified as the most significant disadvantage towards transitioning into the labour market, larger still than socio-economic factors (Lamb & McKenzie 2001). Kenway (2001) asserts that schooling paradoxically does not payoff in terms of career prospects, yet girls remain extremely dependent on it. The reality is, that in order to have a roughly equal position in the labour market as men, girls must perform better and stay in school longer. Yet as evidenced in the significant underrepresentation of women in high-profile careers, education and a feminised workforce have not effectively shifted the gender distribution of power. Anne-Marie Slaughter (2012), who held a top position in the former US presidential Obama administration, suggests the illusion of ‘having it all’ chiefly contributes to underrepresentation, due to women being forced to make compromises in a system that is still strongly influenced by heteronormative values about work and family.

Thus, we see that beyond the girls’ schooling bubble, young women simultaneously practice the normative pathway of higher education required in the current economy; yet resist forward-planning in response to conflictual post-feminist messages amidst ongoing structural gender inequalities.
Riordan (1985) suggests that, ‘single-sex schools … may be particularly advantageous for girls because the top students in all subjects will be female who will serve as role models [and] the teachers also will be predominantly women’ (p. 54). This perspective, while valid, appears to rely on a suspension of gendered disbelief in which women rule - but can it last beyond the school gates? A 2017 report by Forgasz and Leder, on STEM pathways in single-sex versus co-educational schooling in Victoria, suggests that it cannot. Based on an online survey of approximately 1000 participants made up predominantly of all-girls’ school graduates, the report revealed on the one hand, a higher percentage of girls from single-sex schools studied STEM subjects than girls from co-educational schools in the 2015 VCE cohort (Forgasz & Leder 2017, p. 39). On the other hand, there was no demonstrable difference between the two groups with respect to higher education and post-school qualifications. Inconclusively, a higher proportion of women from co-educational schools reported working in Engineering, while a higher percentage of women from single-sex schools reported working in health or allied health sciences (28%) (Forgasz & Leder 2017, p. 39).

Given these somewhat ambivalent results, it is useful to cast one’s gaze to a different Western educational context. One large-scale US study conducted in 2009 compares young women’s transitions to college from single-sex and co-educational schools and indicates that the single-sex environment maybe somewhat more beneficial for girls in university (Sax et al. 2009). As with the Australian context, the results still present minimal difference between the two groups. However, single-sex schools were shown to positively affect academic and political engagement in university and girls were more likely to pursue male-dominated disciplines in

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8 Recruitment bias: due to recruitment issues and commission by the Alliance of Girls’ Schools Australia (AGSA), the report is particularly focused on girls’ schooling outcomes. As such, there is a vast overrepresentation of girls’ school graduates in the sample, thus precluding significant comparative analysis of co-educational schooling outcomes; nonetheless, it provides useful preliminary indicators.
university than their co-educational counterparts (Sax et al. 2009, p. 7). While these findings may indicate that some of the outcomes promoted by elite girls’ schooling are reified in the US tertiary context, this is by no means concrete evidence, given the innumerable contextual factors from school to school that make any meaningful comparisons extremely difficult. Indeed, the study emphasized the importance of distinguishing specific school traits and the characteristics associated with the clientele who chose single-sex schooling. Due to the variability of schools within the private sector, overgeneralising the effects of all-girls education must be avoided. Nonetheless, these comparative studies illuminate how the post-feminist rhetoric rife among these schools only nominally influences graduates’ post-education and career pathways. The lived-experiences of the participants in this study across four analogous schools support this notion: none pursued STEM areas and all bar one expressed disinterest in pursuing male-dominated careers.

![Figure 20](image_url) **Figure 20:** ‘Goals’ photograph I took of bus-stop advertisement for one local elite, private girls’ school (1st November 2018).
Drawing on an advertisement for a local elite girls’ school that I photographed (see figure 20 above), it seems the imperative to ‘SET GOALS AND SMASH THEM’ does not translate into post-school action for these graduates. This phrasing well exemplifies the significance placed on forward-planning as part of the all-rounder ideal. In which, elite girls are expected to plan, resource themselves appropriately, and execute valued and successful individual lives (Allan & Charles 2014, p. 341). This entrepreneurial go-getter-girl image rooted in a post-feminist fantasy, whereby structural gender inequalities are a thing of the past, does little to prepare girls for the challenges they face entering the workforce or juggling a career and family. Its flippant faux-feminist rhetoric contradicts young women’s day-to-day experience outside of school, shaped by the symbolic power of patriarchal gender dominance. Notably, I refer again to the #MeToo movement, which gave voice to innumerable silenced survivors of sexual harassment and rape, as a poignant reminder of women’s ongoing vulnerability and victimhood at the hands of men on all levels of a society (Tolentino 2018), as depicted in the below illustrations (see figures 21 and 21.1). The competing discourses of individual ambition and feminine caregiving fuel young women’s feelings of ambivalence in respect to their perceived social positioning and achievable futures.

*Figures 21 & 21.1: #MeToo illustrations [Left: (Donnelly, L 2017), Right: (Sorlet, L 2018)]*
(Un)Imagined futures and choice biographies

Pia’s ambiguous imagined future is also a response to the double-edged sword of ‘choice’ in late modernity. Pia shows pragmatism in her tentative plans to learn Chinese and specialise in Chinese agricultural and international relations, which has foreseeable political relevance in the future and is a “proper” career for her social positioning. Nonetheless, it is clear she studies her degree largely out of interest and not ambition, evidenced by her enthusiasm for her course and for learning in general, and at this point in time, she does not hold a set career path in her sights. Her ability to pursue her interest rather than her career is emblematic of her class positioning. While uncertainty and ambivalence were apparent in many of the participants’ imagined futures, self-assurance that prospects were open to them was also evident. In addition to exemplifying privilege, Pia’s choices reflect not only her insider-outsider positioning to the forward-planning maxim of the can-do ideal, but also an awareness of the uncertainty that characterises the current labour market. Instability triggered by institutional neoliberal reforms that have directly impacted education, career choices and opportunities for all young people in Western contexts.

As Melbourne-based youth researchers, Cuervo and Wyn (2012) note, for young Australians entering the workforce - this translates to, ‘increased casual, precarious work and de-standardised working-time conditions’ (p. 53). The irony of this new flexibilized ‘choice’ economy is that despite the supposed multiplication of options and opportunities, there is a distinct expectation for young people – though white middle-class girls in particular – to follow the normative path from high school to higher education to top-tier careers (Harris 2004). Given young women’s position as core consumers in the global capitalist economy, governments and corporations are particularly invested in their attainment of well-earning jobs that generate enough disposable income to promote spending (Harris 2004). As German
educational researcher, Manuela Du Bois-Reymond, points out, ‘it is the tension between option/freedom and legitimation/coercion which marks ‘choice biographies’’ (Du Bois-Reymond 1998, p. 65). These binary oppositions of ‘choice’ constitute a new layer in the schizoid entanglement of successful womanhood and the answering ambivalence of young privileged women.

Du Bois-Reymond (1998) further found, through her involvement in a Dutch youth project, that all post-adolescents (males and females alike) are ambivalent about the notion of adulthood, as it unsurprisingly signifies ‘dullness, routine work, and responsibility’ (p. 76). Yet, young women, in particular, expressed more ambivalent attitudes towards commanding their own lives: they strived for lower positions, valued careers less, and made more pragmatic decisions concerning training and profession (Du Bois-Reymond 1998, p. 71). These results support a considerable body of youth research that have found young women’s choices are shaped by issues that surround combining family and careers (Cuervo & Wyn 2011).

**Delayed Motherhood**

The work-life balance presents real challenges for all women. Yet, in the elite girls’ schooling context, amidst ongoing traditional hetero-feminine norms, there is a pointed absence of dialogue concerning homemaking and childrearing in otherwise rigorous guidance in career and education pathways, despite offering Domestic Sciences and Childcare in their curriculum. This is reflected in student social practice through the unanimous taken-for-grantedness of delayed motherhood. Of the girls interviewed, none even mentioned the prospect of children when asked where they saw themselves in 10 to 20 years’ time. The assumption of delayed motherhood has become deeply internalised as a normative middle-class pathway among elite girls. As Pia notes:
There wasn’t much on family, they kind of avoided that subject in terms of – maybe … ‘you’re going to be a housewife’, but they weren’t like, ‘you’re not going to be a stay-at-home mum’. So it was just like, they avoided the topic.

The message that is transmitted by the elite girls’ schools of this study is one that skirts around the complications of having a family within the model of successful womanhood. This is reflected in broader population trends that show increases in deferred timing of parenthood, families headed by single parents, and women opting not to have children (Ruspini 2013). As discussed earlier, these trends correspond with Beck’s argument (1992) that we are heading towards ‘the ultimate market society,’ which is a childless society. While overstated, Beck’s theory highlights how new individualised feminine ideals (heavily promoted in girls’ schooling) have broader implications for reproductive trends through the normalisation of delayed parenthood. This is evidenced in the following figures 22 and 22.1 drawn from several ABS surveys in a recent ABC article by Hanrahan et al., which examined how life has changed for Australians since the 1980s. The authors draw connection between education and delayed motherhood, noting that ‘as women have become more educated, they are also having children later,’ presenting the following findings (Hanrahan et al. 2018):

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This aligns with several girlhood studies (see Charles 2013; Harris 2004; McRobbie 2009) that suggest the unspoken doxa of successful womanhood is a sexual ‘contract’ that requires delayed motherhood. Advancement in the labour market and obtaining a glamorous consumer lifestyle is premised on the notion of an ‘unencumbered individual who can devote herself to full-time paid work’ (Harris 2004, p. 32). Though can-do girls are encouraged not to renounce motherhood altogether – as bearing children remains an important marker of feminine fulfilment (Harris 2004). As aforementioned, the importance of motherhood and care is tacitly transmitted through the domestic sciences and emphasis on soft skills. Nonetheless, the absence of overt motherhood discourse, as well as sexual bodies (regardless
Leading Ladies

Analysing paradoxical femininities

of orientation) in this schooling context demonstrates the taken-for-granted expectation for elite girls to enact strict self-regulation and make the ‘right’ choices concerning their bodies.

Young women, Angela McRobbie posits, are now normatively in possession of a distinct occupational identity (McRobbie 2007, p. 727) and white middle-class girls are groomed to take their mantle as the new global ‘competitive elite’ (McRobbie 2009, p. 74). This in turn, perpetuates even greater vilification of Other young women who cannot or do not live up to these classed expectations (Charles 2013, p. 140). Within this individualised late modern context, Charles (2013) argues that class divisions are viciously upheld between women yet such structural disparities are unlikely to be identified as such, more often passed off as individual successes or failures (p. 141). These established gender discourses are formed through binary oppositions of ‘good girl versus bad girl’ or ‘virgin versus whore’ and can be read as determinants of ‘success or failure’ (Harris 2004). Such a fixation on girls who lose out or succeed in new times has become bound in how young womanhood is constructed in late modernity.

**Insider/Outsider Privilege**

Returning to Pia, considering her ambivalent social positioning through Bourdieu’s notion of social field, it is clear that ambivalence arises through an individual’s uneven embeddedness within differing sets of power relations, occurring from the tension and conflict of social forces functioning in and across specific fields (McNay 1999, p. 110). Bourdieu argues that such dissonance may lead to greater reflexive awareness – which he describes as the ‘lucidity of the excluded’ (Adams 2006, p. 519). Pia’s footing in different social fields with uneven power relations was evident in her observation about the ways individual competitiveness and
pushy behaviour on the sporting field in school were heavily policed by students, though she experienced no such peer surveillance in her club soccer team outside of school. She stated,

In sport … a kid in my year – she used to get so much crap for being aggressive and competitive in sport and stuff and everyone would be like, ‘what are you doing?’ … when I play soccer outside of school, it’s not like that.

Her participation in a sporting group beyond her schooling social field gave her a degree of distanciation from the heavily surveilled feminine norms of her school and facilitated greater critical awareness. Ambivalence is rooted in the inhabiting of multiple subjectivities, which is increasingly common in reflexive late modern conditions, however, it is also a privilege not afforded to all.

Australian sociologists, Steven Threadgold and Pam Nilan (2009), draw on Giddens (1991) to suggest that ‘for privileged youth, reflexivity as cultural capital deployed in habitus offers considerable advantage for negotiation of future risks’ (p. 48). Part of privilege means you’re afforded the luxury to not question whether or not you can get a job, but rather, to ask which job you will enjoy the most. All participants had confidence in their capacity to “do education”. The way the meritocratic, increasingly privatised, Australian educational system is designed to favour middle-class students and the new normative path to higher education, instils a certain degree of confidence in their academic abilities as capable and well-educated young women.

**Gemma: ‘Out’sider positioning and the ‘right’ feminine body**

Gemma’s self-narrative supports the literature that suggests gender roles are more rigid in schools than represented in wider society (Charles 2013). Her account as a graduate from seven years ago combined with Pia’s account as a graduate from two years ago generates something of a timeline of PGC from two very differing graduate perspectives. In addition to
Ali’s account from three years ago, the intersection of these experiences illuminates the prevalence of certain dominant norms maintained within the school, namely the pervasiveness of traditional hetero-feminine standards. Notably Pia’s perspective illustrates some degree of progressive policy-making, absent in Gemma’s account, indicative of the school’s engagement with rapid social change.

We see how more diverse sexualities have come to be accepted on quite a significant scale in accordance with reflexive social shifts that have a ripple-on effort from institutions to individuals – evidenced in the emergence of the LGBTQI shout-out group at PGC, supported by administration. However, appearing a certain hetero-feminine way is still heavily policed by students, evidenced in Pia’s description of acceptable sporting competitiveness and Gemma’s example of peers questioning why she wasn’t interested in boys or handbags. Peer surveillance is used to ensure girls do not appear or behave too masculine, to be desirable and desiring of men. Further upheld through the everyday mundane social aesthetics of the school, evidenced in the strict feminine dress code.

Like Bourdieu, Gemma identified the necessity to ‘play the game’ in her schooling social field. The game in this instance, is the embodiment of the all-rounder girl who is both bright (diverse skills and distinguishable talent) and beautiful (compliant and good-looking).

Gemma demonstrates a distanced critical understanding of the dominant discourses (or doxa) that the school and its agents re-produce. This understanding can be attributed to her privileged upbringing, which affords her the cultural and social tools needed to perceive the social schemas of this social field. However, the discordance of her non-normative sexual identity, her focused skillset, and her outspoken nature, meant she was unable to ‘just keep silent and act the bit’. Compliance and usefulness emerge as the ‘rules’ that Gemma perceives as necessary to succeed in this schooling social field. This description of ‘usefulness’ through a Bourdieusian lens, can be understood as acquired social and cultural
capital. The ‘usefulness’ of Alex Carter, the other openly gay student Gemma described, was established through her marketability as an exceptional musician. Indeed, Alex performed at many school events and created some press coverage for the school. Non-normative sexuality did not appear to encumber Alex, who was well-liked and evidently capable at acquiring social and cultural capital by way of ‘playing the game’.

The celebration of difference is central to the schizoid double-pull, whereby ‘former ‘Others’ take centre stage without troubling established values of racism or homophobia’ on the condition they offer some marketable value that upholds the logic of sameness (Epstein & Renold 2010, p. 70). Gemma’s account of Alex Carter highlights the schizoid push-pull of feminine ideals, where non-normative gender scripts must be counterbalanced by other desirable all-rounder traits to remain within the bounds of the acceptable girlhood reproduced in this schooling social field. Gemma on the other hand, reported that she was already ‘socially on the outskirts’ prior to coming out as gay – saying that she did not get along with most students and teachers and instead formed a ‘pretentious kids’ outcast group’.

As a student that always presented non-normative gender scripts, her position of social exclusion was dialectically generated through a process of her own resistance to the doxa of her schooling social field and through the social exclusion she experienced upon entering this field. Her unwillingness to participate in the dominant peer social hierarchy - largely dictated by hetero-feminine performances, or to strive towards the all-rounder ideal, inhibited her ability to acquire social and cultural capital. Without these forms of capital to bolster her social difference – she was vulnerable (or ‘at risk’) and bullied quite severely.

*Right body / Wrong body*

The ‘right’ feminine disposition at PGC is usefully captured by Ali, in her description of the typical PGC girl:
She has to be “pretty”, but … like you can’t be “different-pretty”, you have to be pretty and standard. The nice hair and everything, uniform’s always immaculate. They’re super friendly to all the teachers … Oh, and taking notes in class, they have to be neat.

It is well established that the body and how it is constructed is central to identity (Butler 1993; Grosz 1994; Paechter 2010). The ‘right’ kind of feminine body continues to be a crucial component of successful womanhood. Women’s bodies are notably ‘a focal point in interactions with others,’ both historically and in the current patriarchal context (Zitzelsberger 2005, p. 393). As a young non-hetero woman who largely rejected traditional hetero-feminine norms, Gemma describes ways that normative dispositions of ‘acceptable’ feminine bodies are imposed, negotiated and resisted in this schooling context (Zitzelsberger 2005, p. 391).

Aapola et al. (2005) point out that young women must paradoxically ‘submit to the male gaze and yet exhibit responsibility in avoiding unwanted male attention’ (p. 140). Even in all-girls schooling contexts, peers police one another as ‘employees of the male gaze’ (Renold & Allan 2007, p. 462). Within this surveilled setting, girls are required to take personal responsibility for the (fe)male gaze and carefully self-regulate their body image in order to present “attractive” hetero-femininity without being “too sexual”, thus locating oneself as a “good” girl and not a “bad” girl (Charlton 2007, p. 128). For instance, several graduates described the practice of rolling up one’s regulation knee-length skirt to reveal more leg, however, too many rolls were considered inappropriate or ‘messy’. The conversation among St Joe’s graduates highlights this contradiction:

**E:** You’ve got to present yourself well, it’s like presenting yourself in the workplace … You look messy [if] your skirt’s rolled up and you’ve got a big roll of skirt.

**A:** It did just look bad! …
M: … The male teachers wouldn’t want to see, like, Year Nines with skirts halfway up their thigh.

The above conversation presents several layers of classed, gendered, and late modern discourse. Beyond the maintenance of heterosexual hegemony and “appropriate” middle-class feminine behaviour, as Charles (2010) argues, the policing of gender norms is also about the promotion of certain ways of being gendered, or being a young woman, that are linked with successful late modern citizenship. Thus, ‘gender norms are policed by girls in ways that secure normative girl-power femininity, as well as normative notions of heterosexual femininity’ (Charles 2010, p. 45). This culturally mediated regulation is a result of girls and young women internalizing negative associations with socially deemed ‘inappropriate’ female behaviours and identities. These practices also encode and privilege heterosexuality and are mediated through dimensions of class, race, ethnicity, (dis)ability, and age (Griffin 2004). That girls and young women regularly position themselves in opposition to these “bad” girl traits, indicates the power of these notions as normalizing and affirming certain hetero-sexualized female behaviours (Charlton 2007, p.126).

The female body is a site where layers upon layers of older and newer gender norms are manifested through one’s divided habitus, all of which are simultaneously pushing and pulling – as one tension lessens, another tightens, and so on. As Spaargaren et al. (2016, p. 25) posit, ‘Our dispositions are the means through which actors perceive the world, what is seen as ‘true’ and ‘know what to do next’ is both a cognitive and embodied, physical sense’.

Confidence and assertiveness are recognised as essential characteristics of successful womanhood in the contemporary neoliberal, post-feminist context. Young women with the looks, the sass, and the brains are lauded as the most likely to take on the challenges of the late-modern capitalist labour market. Having the appropriate ‘looks’ is constituted through
attractiveness to men – illustrating the ways hetero-femininity governs particular normative ideas of successful womanhood within the educational context. The pressure to be attractive and ‘know boys’ is also evidenced in the participant accounts and demonstrates the pervasiveness of the male gaze in student social interactions.

Moderation of the male gaze significantly informs the schizoid double-pull of binaries of good girl-versus-bad girl and virgin-versus-whore. Evidenced in the ways graduates would often position their identities in opposition to Other girls – those that were described as ‘sluts’, ‘rebellious’, or ‘boyish’. Notably, most graduates perceived their year group as ‘the good group’, compared to other years or schools. Jenny described the year below her as being ‘out of control’ and always seeming ‘older than they were’, recalling one particularly promiscuous ‘popular girl’, who ‘got so out of control she was sent to a boarding school in Melbourne’. This reveals the normative dimensions of sexual innocence, restraint, and class respectability that girls use to locate themselves within the bounds of ‘appropriate’ female student behaviour. Further, it shows the precariousness of student sexuality as a form of social capital: though it increases popularity among peers, too much sexual expression is viewed as reprehensible by school and students alike.

Several studies in the elite girls’ schooling context denote the ways that female students govern each other to maintain hetero-feminine norms (see Ali 2003; Renold 2001a, 2005a). Those young women that are openly competitive and show their marks are perceived as ‘pushy’ (Skelton 2001) or ‘manlike’ (Renold & Allan 2006), whereas girls who are supportive of their peers and conceal any overt aggression or individual ambition are more widely accepted and thus compelled to enact traditional gender scripts in this context, particularly on the sporting field (Wardman et al. 2010). In order to exist as an accepted agent within this elite educational field, one must ascribe to individualistic competitive performance. However, girls were simultaneously scrutinised if they displayed intense
competitiveness too outwardly. Pia observed the peer policing of competiveness at PGC when considering the differences between girls’ and boys’ schooling, saying, “The difference is—girls hide their marks but try to get better since it’s competition, whereas boys kind of openly send photos of their marks or whatever”. As previously mentioned, Pia recalls an instance where a girl was bullied for being “aggressive and competitive” in sport.

This highlights the ways young women are expected to integrate demands for liberal individual competitiveness in combination with internalised traditional gender roles on a mundane everyday-level. Pia describes the expression of overt competiveness—particularly in the masculine sphere of sporting—as an unacceptable form of womanhood. As previously noted, Pia didn’t experience the same kind of hetero-feminine regulation when playing club sport, indicating the prominence of traditional gender scripts in elite girls’ schooling. As Evans (2006) noted in her UK study examining girls’ low participation in physical education, in which, the results indicated that girls still feel pressure from the male gaze to present their bodies to boys as passively beautiful, yet they also feel pressure to be competent at sport and thus present their bodies as active. Notably, Evans (2006, p. 547) similarly found that single-sex PE does not provide a space where the male gaze is absent, indicative of its internalisation.

From a young age, Gemma was bullied for acting ‘very boyish’. Gemma’s masculinized habitus may be perceived through numerous different bodily practices, such as walking, talking, exercising, and eating (Reay 1995). Indeed, the ways an individual treats their body ‘reveals the deepest dispositions of the habitus’ (Bourdieu 1984, p. 190). Gemma described being ‘very opinionated’ in class. While practices that produce high visibility, like speaking out in class, typically increase the status of boys in school, for girls, similar behaviour is
considered illegitimate (Winkler-Reid 2017, p. 291). As Hey (1997) suggests, “acting big” (commanding others) is an inverse of appropriate femininity. While confidence and assertiveness are esteemed attributes of the all-rounder girl, displays of aggression or disruptiveness in class challenge the idealized “nice” image of girls, because they are self-focused and not about pleasing others, particularly the male gaze (Charlton 2007, p. 127). This is evidenced in Ali’s earlier statement about the typical PGC girl and the expectation that she is ‘friendly to all the teachers’. Girls’ powerful preoccupation with “being nice” and being a member of a dominant friendship group as a means of distinguishing and performing “femininity” is well documented (Hey 1997; Walkerdine et al. 2001; Renold & Allan 2007). Thus, as Renold and Allan (2010, p. 459) note:

Girls continue to hide, downplay, or deny rather than celebrate and improve upon their successes and feel the pressure to conform to normative cultural representations of (hetero)femininity.

While Gemma stated that she attempted, to ‘just keep her mouth shut’ and engage with the normative expectation of compliance, she could not internalise these practices that were at odds with her disparate masculinized habitus.

Her outspokenness also represents a form of classed social distinction, constructing herself as an ‘equal’ of the teachers. This was exemplified in her Christian education classes, where Gemma would actively challenge the teacher’s authority, going so far as to read the entire bible to establish her knowledge over that of the teacher’s. Such dispositions are due to the interaction of privileged habitus in a particular educational field (Reay 1995, p. 364). Through this process of challenging in the classroom context, Gemma showed many characteristics of self-motivation and ‘real learning’ (Walkerdine 1990, p. 50), productive of natural distinction (Bourdieu 1990b). Nonetheless, this practice did not elevate her social
status, only further differentiate her from the hegemonic ‘nice girl’ doxa of the school, as disruptive and confrontational and thus ‘at risk’.

Student relationships with teachers have important implications for their social status and acquiring of capital. Teachers hold a particular position of influence within the elite educational field, as evidenced by DiMaggio and Useem (1978) and Bourdieu (1984). These landmark studies on class distinction both found that within the dominant upper and middle classes, teachers value and hold the most cultural capital – often rewarding students who also possess it (Dumais 2002, p. 46). Moreover, Bourdieu (1973, p. 96) argues that the most valuable form of capital within the educational field is cultural capital, stating ‘academic success is directly dependent upon cultural capital and on the inclination to invest in the academic market’. This assertion has particular pertinence in the current neoliberal educational landscape of ‘choice’, investment in children as projects of ‘value-addedness’ (see Lareau 2003; Meadmore & Meadmore 2004) and ‘concerted cultivation’ (see Irwin & Elley 2011; Maxwell & Aggleton 2013), concepts I have already touched on in previous sections. Through a Bourdieusian lens, we can see how the tense relationships Gemma held with her teachers impaired her ability to accumulate social and cultural capital, limiting her capacity to comfortably navigate her educational field.

It must be noted, that despite the power of teachers within schools, the occupation remains feminised and undervalued (Marais 2007). Notably few girls from elite schooling choose the profession, with one participant in this study planning to become a teacher. Certainly, there is much room for further research on teachers in elite girls’ schools.

At PGC, like Sarah Winkler-Reid’s London Collingson School, a typical means for girls to gain status and visibility is through their physical appearance (Winkler-Reid 2017, p. 291). Referring again to Ali’s description of the typical PGC girl, feminine ‘prettiness’ and classed
‘neatness’ are normative requirements of success in this schooling context. Gemma mentioned having no skills or desire to style her hair, preferring to keep it short and minimally groomed. As previously discussed, while androgyny and tomboyism have gained social legitimacy, there is simultaneously a demand for stricter gender regimes emphasizing hyper-femininity (Renold & Ringrose 2011; Epstein & Renold 2010; Allan 2009). Hyper-femininity is shown to be enforced by Gemma’s peers through comments Gemma regularly received to grow her hair and to ‘look more like a girl’. This further illuminates the role that peer surveillance plays in constructing gendered identities in the schooling context.

**Elisa: Ableism and Individual Effort**

Elisa employs intentional strategies to downplay and conceal her body by wearing ‘the biggest dresses’ she could find in the school nurse’s office. Though Elisa stated she wore oversized dresses for comfort, I suggest that this particular aesthetic practice signifies several deeper gendered meanings within the school’s social aesthetic field. Despite being afforded little room to negotiate her appearance within the bounds of strict traditional feminine uniform policies, Elisa nonetheless returns the ‘gaze’ of dominant society that constructs her young female body as desirable and her disabled body as undesirable, taking control of the ways she is seen through concealment. By presenting no defined feminine figure, this practice takes away the traditional ladylike aesthetic of the school uniform and resists the dominant peer-based imperative to appear attractive to men. Thus, Elisa transforms the values and meaning of her body in an embodiment of individual autonomy and resistance.

Individual effort in late modern societies is bound in the neoliberal imperative of self-responsibility and motivation (O’Connor 2006). Thus, sole responsibility is imparted on the individual to perform, irrespective of structural forces inhibiting the individual, or in Elisa’s case, a chronic and hidden condition. Conversely, Skelton and Francis (2012, p. 455) suggest
the implication for working-class girls is the internalisation of their ‘failure’. Unlike working-class girls, however, Elisa’s class-assuredness, her mother’s employment as the school nurse, and her long-term immersion in this particular educational field (since pre-primary), engenders in her habitus a level of practical mastery or ‘le sens pratique’ (feel for the game) (Bourdieu 1990, p. 52). This unconscious knowledge of school doxa along with her (in)visible ambivalent social positioning generates greater critical awareness to negotiate dominant discourses, whether through compliance, resistance or autonomy. However, such strategies still did not equip her for internalised ableism.

The education marketplace is necessarily buttressed by an individualism so deeply entrenched in popular discourse that its wide acceptance can be viewed as a hegemony of individualism (Youdell 2004, p. 410). This individualism operates to further legitimate practices that orient responsibility for educational success and failure on the individual student, serving the interests of some while reproducing or even intensifying the disadvantages of others (O’Flynn & Petersen 2007, p. 469). For young women in the elite schooling context, such individualistic ideals place pressure on girls to make the right choices for their future or be at risk of failure (Harris 2004).

Elisa makes it quite clear that the school viewed her as not working hard enough to overcome the challenges she encountered, she felt that others generally distrusted the extent of her syndrome no matter how many times she repeated it, instead seeing it ‘as temporary’. Previous studies indicate that visibility of the disability itself often significantly contributes to the perceptions, attitudes, and responses towards them (Delicata 2016). According to Tyjewski (2006), ‘a majority of people are presumed to be heterosexual and either male or female and non-disabled unless one bears some stereotypical characteristic, such as carrying a white cane or having a 'limp wrist’ (pp. 109-110). Indeed, Elisa stated: ‘It’s not like I was constantly with crutches or something; I was walking’.

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Drawing on Bourdieusian theory, we see the ways student resistance produces tensions between concepts of order and appropriate ways for the female agent to behave. This operates to destabilize taken-for-granted notions of established practices. Her experience draws attention to the fluid and multiple ways embodiment of gender and disability discourses are produced, seen, and experienced, through the identity formation of ‘Other’ girls from within the dominant ruling group. While she was continually confronted with a sense of “internalized ableism” (Hutcheon & Wolbring 2012, p. 43) from teachers and peers, she managed to achieve adequate success socially and academically. Elisa’s self-narrative illuminates the perimeters of both ongoing and emergent dominant discourses in the girls’ schooling context, namely showing how able bodies and individual effort are normative markers of feminine success. Yet autonomy and resistance are possible. Psychosocially, however, the emotional toll proved quite high in Elisa’s case.

**Ambivalent Identities and the All-rounder Fantasy**

This chapter built on McNay’s feminist application of Bourdieusian embodiment, showing the ways girls can be complicit yet critical of their schooling social field. This is evidenced by Pia’s ability to perform can-do girl qualities, yet simultaneously not identify as such. Embodying instead, ambivalence and ambiguity in her perceived subject positioning. This reveals that even those positioned inside the dominant all-rounder discourse are imperfectly positioned. Moreover, it indicates an embodiment of the broader schizoid cultural climate, in which it is impossible to truly inhabit one identity formation, due to the ways it is in opposition with others and contextually negotiated depending on schooling institution, peer group, and family norms. Begging the question: who does fit this dominant hetero-feminine formation of womanhood that effectively marginalises Other women? The answer is no one. Those in this study who displayed the desirable ‘all-rounder’ traits in some respects rejected
this identity formation in others. It is a fantasized identity that can never be completely synched to reality and schools are doing girls a disservice by maintaining it as a normative expectation.

I have argued that the ambivalences of participants, expressed through their mixed emotions about schooling, are characteristic of divided habitus in late modernity. Therein, social agents may occupy a multiplicity of subject positions, finding liminal spaces between ideal and pathologised identities. This unfixed positioning is evidenced through Elisa’s insider-outsider orientation where she could “pass” as an all-rounder through her academic ability, social skills and normative white, good-looking appearance. Thus, we see how sameness and otherness can be embodied in unison. However, Elisa’s inability to perform the physical requirements of good-all-rounder studentship, simultaneously marginalised her. By concealing her body in baggy dresses and avoiding makeup, Elisa refused to be subject to the scrutiny of ableist ‘employees of the male gaze’.

My theoretical apparatus was chiefly operationalised through Gemma and Pia’s self-narratives, as well as Jenny and Elisa’s to a lesser extent. Through a feminist practice approach, these young women are shown to be structured and structuring agents within their social field. Whereby, they enact strategies to carve out their own identities positioned simultaneously inside and outside the dominant all-rounder ideal. The girls’ ability to navigate alternate femininities through ambivalence is no doubt a product of the cultural and economic capital afforded to them through their privileged status. Thus, it is possible for them to negotiate the doxa of their schools in ways that do not necessarily pathologise them or compromise their social positioning. This is evidenced in Jenny’s self-narrative where her close relationships with her teachers afforded her greater cultural capital, and thus a greater
sense of security in her social positioning. However, we see through Elisa and Gemma’s negative experiences that this privilege does not completely exempt identities that cannot and/or will not fit the all-rounder dominant ideal. Thus, we see the narrow, yet in some ways pliable, perimeters of the dominant all-rounder ideal, as well as the cost of being positioned against it. In late modern conditions, it is as if girls are expected to walk a precarious tightrope of appropriate femininity with “successful womanhood” shimmering like a mirage in the distance and failure on all sides. It is no wonder that the common response here is one of ambivalence: the struggle for success is great and the outcomes are ever-uncertain.
Chapter Six:  
Conclusions:  
The unattainability of “successful womanhood”

Summary

Through Chapters One and Two, I introduced a key research question of this thesis, which was to identify the characteristics of “successful womanhood”. Additionally, I introduced the core components of this thesis, concerning the formation of appropriate femininities, women’s education, and post-feminism. I paid particular attention to the continued influence of traditional ‘ladylike’ norms in the elite girls’ schooling context, as well as contradictions that have been characteristic of this schooling social field from its very inception in the Nineteenth-Century. This was achieved through a historical analysis of private girls’ schooling, as well an examination of recent broader changes in gender relations. Through this socio-historical approach, I highlighted a key argument of the thesis, the traditional-progressive paradox. This helped to contextualise elite girls’ schooling and womanhood amid social change and individualisation. These chapters showed how certain socio-political changes in the composition of gender relations, family, work, and education, have contributed to rapidly shifting gendered expectations.

Chapters One and Two also presented the core theoretical apparatus of the thesis: the ‘schizoid double-pull’, divided habitus, and ambivalence. These concepts importantly synthesized Bourdiesian Practice Theory with notions of gendered embodiment and ambivalent identities. The notion of gendered “split” habitus formed the central means of interpreting young women’s ambivalent identity formations through their elite schooling
social field. Here, I pointed out how any transformations in gender schemas are slow to occur, due to their particularly embedded and naturalised form. While the historical conditions that rendered certain gendered expectations may no longer exist, they live on in the habitus of individuals nonetheless. This addressed a central research question of the study, which aimed to conceptualise how paradoxical changes and continuities can exist simultaneously in formations of womanhood.

The characteristics of “successful womanhood” were further explored in these chapters through a review of literature and social theory. Centrally, I drew on the works of feminist theorists, Angela McRobbie, Anita Harris, Rosi Braidotti, and Marnina Gonick. These scholars have variably explored the ways girlhood, and indeed feminism, has been commodified in recent times. Harris and McRobbie point out how notions of feminism are used as marketing tools by corporations to sell the image of empowered and glamorous girls, notably in the marketization of ‘girl-power’. This is apparent in the elite girls’ schooling context, in which schools promote the dominant representation of “successful womanhood”. I argued through a relevant study by Claire Charles (2013), that the archetype of “success” is a stylish high-flying career woman: trailblazing into leading male-dominated fields. This image is one that is imbued in traditional and classed hetero-femininity: dependent on presenting a certain kind of woman – one who is white, lady-like, good looking, and able-bodied. Nonetheless, as the data in later chapters showed, the rise of feminist awareness has not gone unnoticed by the students and is understood and enacted in multiple ways.

Chapter Three addressed the research question of how elite girls’ schools represent themselves through visual promotional materials, and the kinds of gendered messages that they project to potential clientele. This revealed the fragile public façade of these elite girls’
schools. Here, I used recent visual data to build my central arguments concerning the traditional-progressive paradox, all-rounder girls, and Other femininities. These schools have business incentives to present cutting-edge education, technology, and social progressiveness to maintain their elite status. Simultaneously, they must balance the expectations of a largely conservative white, upper-middle-class client base. Hence, they maintain the appeal of ‘traditional values’ that go along with this elite status, rooted in Anglican, European high culture. This traditional-progressive paradox is shown to undermine any genuine feminist missions, such as some of those enacted by PGC principal, Amanda Cartwright. While some schools, like PGC, may push progressiveness to a greater extent than others, gendered representations all uphold ideal, white upper-middle-class femininities.

Through Chapter 3, I also introduced a central research question: to identify the role that school policy and rhetoric plays in shaping the schooling social field. The findings indicate that despite all the proclamations about leadership, global citizenship, and opportunities for ‘perpetual flourishing’, the maintenance of ‘soft skills’ reinscribes traditional feminine ideals of service and restraint. This dissonance reinforces the embodiment of schizoid feminine subjectivities, experienced as a striation of ambivalences across girls’ gendered habitus.

In Chapters Four and Five, I compiled and analysed interview-based data from school administrators and recent graduates. A qualitative analysis was used to explore the intense focus on and investment in young, white upper-middle-class girls. Specifically, I examined how societal expectations are embedded in the social fields of elite girls’ schools through participant perspectives. Individualised, neoliberal, and post-feminist imperatives are shown to drive these schools. In turn, they produce policy and rhetoric designed to instil in each student the belief that they can ‘have it all’ if only they try hard enough. School promises to prepare girls for highflying careers in male-dominated domains are undermined by everyday
practices. Mundane social interactions are shown to promote traditional feminine values of service and self-sacrifice by downplaying individual competitiveness and promoting ‘lady-like’ dispositions.

Through these chapters, I answered the question of what kind of woman these schools aim to produce, and that is one that must have it all: “girliness” and drive, with perfect body and perfect mind. Anita Harris (2004) notes that the current context of individualism means that if you do not fit this construction of “successful womanhood,” as many do not, any failings are personal ones and position you as Other - outside the normative discourse of success. However, I have shown through the graduate interviews that young women respond to these drivers in a range of ways – from acceptance, ambivalence, to outright resistance: re-articulating some elements and resisting others.

**Bursting the Elite Girls’ Schooling Bubble**

Elite girls’ schools create a fantasy of gender equality, where all positions of power and high achievements are attained by those students who can best fulfil the incredibly high ‘all-rounder’ standards. Such expectations are informed by individualistic, meritocratic, and classed values, and guided by predominantly female teachers and administrators. Perhaps this is intended to make girls feel unencumbered by the harsh social realities of systemic gender oppression, and able to ‘see barriers and just step over them’, as Pia put it. However, the graduate stories, along with some sobering national and global statistics, indicate that “the bubble” is quite quick to burst in the post-compulsory schooling years. Young women will pursue their success trajectories through higher education and into careers, yet their career advancement is stifled by structural oppression. When it comes to childrearing, women
continue to be positioned as the primary caregivers, and the first to make personal sacrifices. This is nurtured through the undercurrent of traditional heteronormative values implanted even within the new ‘can-do’ girl ideal. These values are then transmitted through popular culture in post-feminist depictions of girl-power, and the everyday practices of elite girls’ schooling.

Significantly, as Cuervo and Wyn’s (2011) longitudinal study illuminated, middle-class tertiary-educated women were the least likely of any group to have full-time employment by the age of thirty in Australia. According to the can-do girl model that proliferates popular culture, this age bracket should find a white middle-class woman in the midst of her career as a member of the global elite (Harris 2004). Meanwhile, all bar one participant in this project expressed ambivalence and uncertainty about their futures. This reflects a climate that exacerbates young women’s divided habitus in the wake of an unstable and flexible late capitalist labour market. I have argued that the re-production of a skilled and acquiescent female workforce is crucial to success of the late capitalist economy. The considerable market value of young women as a crucial consumer group propels the marketing of post-feminist ideals. This association links successful young womanhood with a glamorous consumer lifestyle – inciting notions of financial independence, choice, beauty, and savviness (Harris 2004). Ultimately, this serves to drive women towards high-status careers with greater expendable income and thus greater spending power. However, intense regulation of appropriate womanhood demanding ‘good girl’ femininities, as highlighted in Gemma’s account, perpetuates the re-production of docile female workers that can ‘uncomplainingly participate in meeting the needs of the marketplace’ (Harris 2004, p. 19). Hence, the market benefits by ensuring that women continue to strive as the workhorses of current service economies.
While popular culture and elite girls’ schools are creating marketable representations of individualised post-feminism, the awareness and import of feminism is, nonetheless, not lost on their pupils. Evidenced as some girls negotiate their own forms of young feminism outside the dominant structures that focus so intently on their success. The data shows ways that young women are creating their own ‘girls’ spaces’. In which, they negotiate appropriate femininity through ambivalence and critical distance, without completely rejecting dominant norms or being rejected by them. Yet the views of some girls, namely of the St Joe’s group, still seem to reflect popular culture and their schools’ post-feminist ideology – maintaining that gender equality is already achieved - the fight is won. Perhaps this is indicative of the influence of two dominant voices within the group that identified as members of the Liberal party, a political sphere that also promotes notions of post-feminism\textsuperscript{10} (Okotel 2019). The continuity in gender ideologies from their educational social field to their political social field has maintained the elite school bubble in ways that other participants did not experience. These graduate accounts and school representations were presented to offer some situated and personal insights into the construction of young femininities that are, in reality, an increasingly messy mosaic of contradiction and negotiation.

**Limitations:**

The construction of my research design was somewhat atypical and thus requires some explanation. This study was conducted in three parts, firstly devised as a case study of PGC

\textsuperscript{10} Karina Okotel, Liberal Party federal vice president, in a discussion concerning women in politics following the resignation of several high profile female politicians from the Liberal Party: When asked if gender matters for delivering certain policy issues, she stated: ‘I find that position demeaning … I think what is being inferred is that it’s the “soft fuzzy” issues, the family issues that women are good for … I think it really puts down the contributions that women are able to make … it’s not about their gender, it’s about their background, their experience’. This statement captures the contradictory nature of post-feminism: simultaneously celebrating women’s empowerment, yet undermining ongoing structural inequalities and the role of caregiver, still vastly represented by women.
through one-on-one interviews with two graduates and two administrators. It was later expanded to include focus groups and interviews with recent graduates from three additional elite girls’ schools located proximally to PGC. The image analysis of online promotional material from the top independent girls’ schools across six states was also subsequently added. This process of expanding from a focused study offers some potential limitations to the research. For one, the considerable depth of the data gathered from PGC is not equally represented in the other schools. I recognise that there is an imbalance between the rich data gathered at PGC and the data from graduates of the accompanying three schools. However, the similarities in reports from across the board show the ubiquitousness of certain themes, namely the all-rounder ideal. These combined findings broaden the scope and import of the themes and self-narratives depicted. The study thus encompasses a detailed focus of PGC, a snapshot of how girls’ experience local contexts, and how schools present themselves in broader contexts. The expansion of this data set has offered up a broader contribution of knowledge in the fields of elite and gender studies. Moreover, the use of social aesthetics, as well as interview-based data helps to triangulate girls’ experiences in this context.

The decision to only focus on six schools in my visual analysis was done to ensure that the primary focus remained on the qualitative interview-based data. The use of visual data was designed to only be supplementary as a means of contextualising the broader schooling landscape in Australia. However, the inclusion of more school promotional images would have strengthened the analysis and identification of key themes. The limited data pool, of course, means that only so much significance can be extrapolated on a larger scale.

While the decision to interview recent graduates has yielded some insightful data, there are some distinct limitations to this retrospective approach. By interviewing girls after they have
left their insular, ‘bubble-like’ schooling social fields, one does not get a sense of the division between elite girls and different social groupings during school, which has been noted as a distinct theme in other in-school studies (Kenway 1990). This practice is identified as social distancing, wherein, elite schools have historically kept girls away from others ‘beneath them’ – to avoid suffering class contagion – as Sara Delamont explains (1978).

The girls’ departure from their schooling social field is what allows them to have a critical distance. Had they been interviewed in-school, the results may have been quite different.

Ethnographic research is recommended in-school to document how young women come to internalise or reject class distancing, as well as the perceived options available to them during schooling. Questions remain regarding who the bubble precisely excludes, what are the drivers that both maintain it during school, and cause it to rupture during girls’ transitions into university and the workforce beyond. As such, future class analyses of these schools must address not only the othering within, but the othering of those outside the elite enclave.

**Contributions to Knowledge:**

This research has argued firstly; that elite girls’ schools are re-producing increasingly paradoxical standards of “successful womanhood” through everyday practice and public representations, and secondly; that young women are negotiating this schizoid social terrain through varying degrees of resistance, re-articulation, and ambivalence. Centrally, it has taken up the complicated question of how ideal femininities are understood and enacted by white, upper-middle-class young women. These ‘elite girls’ represent the dominant social grouping within this schooling social field and the preeminent subjects of late modernity (Harris 2004). I have sought to situate elite girls’ schooling within the broader historical, cultural, and political spheres that dialectically inform it. As I have shown, this schooling setting is particularly pertinent in illuminating the influence of post-feminist and late modern
individualistic discourses that are shaping new regulatory femininities for young women. Through this context, we see the continuities of certain traditional heteronormative gender norms. The upkeep of which, have ongoing implications for the formation of young women’s gendered habitus, limiting how they see themselves and their futures within the bounds of acceptable feminine virtues.

My theoretical apparatus of the ‘schizoid double-pull’, divided habitus, and ambivalence, contextualised within a socio-historical perspective offers unique insights into the fields of elite, girlhood, and feminist education studies. These concepts are utilised through a feminist practice approach. This feminist practice approach is articulated through the social aesthetic field (as seen earlier through advertising techniques, as well as through uniform and social spaces); everyday social interactions between teachers and students, and among peers; and through the rhetoric and policies used by authorities of the school, particularly by principals. While schools may tactically employ ‘progressive’ feminist rhetoric, they effectively reinforce the traditional ‘rules of the game’ by implementing standardised hetero-feminine ways of acting. Yet, as notions of ambivalence and divided habitus helped to show – the embodied subject is formed through dominant social norms, though is not irreducible to them (McNay 1999).

This thesis uniquely mobilises and extends Bauman’s conceptualisation of ambivalent social positioning through utilisation of Braidotti’s ‘schizoid double-pull’ and Bourdieu’s ‘divided habitus’. These concepts were synthesized through binary oppositions that emerged through the visual and verbal data, such as “brainy-pretty”, “girly-sporty”, “good girl-bad girl”, and “virgin-whore”. Through these concepts, we see that no binary classification in the construction of order can entirely align with an individual’s ongoing experience of reality (Bauman 1991).
Future Directions:

There is a distinct absence of discourse surrounding sexual bodies (irrespective of orientation) and sexual desire in elite girls’ schooling. The signification of absent sexual bodies in these schools is an important avenue for future research on the embodiment of gendered practices. Discourses of young women’s sexuality and desire are notably minimal in the graduate and administrator data. This is consistent with a body of feminist scholarship, which suggests a pervasive school doxa frames social agents within – students and teachers – as desexualised (Youdell 2005). This thesis has touched on the ways girls construct ‘appropriate’ feminine identities by utilising sexuality. Evidenced in the internalisation and peer-regulation of the male gaze, involving demonstrations of desirability and sexual interest in men, within the bounds of upper-middle-class respectability. Simultaneously, there is the individualistic, often implicit, directive for can-do girls to make the ‘right’ choices in self-regulation of sexuality and motherhood. The requirement to make the correct sexual choices while repressing sexual identity embeds feelings of shame and restraint that are countercontradictive of the new agentic, sassy, and sexually-empowered woman venerated in popular culture. School practices which serve to preserve young women’s sexual innocence, therefore deny what young people consider important, thus divesting them of sexual agency (Allen 2007). This was indicated in Pia’s ‘womanly’ awakening upon finishing school. Further focus is needed to highlight the ways in which traditional ideas about gender and sexuality have continued salience in young women’s lives, even girls who may have ‘the world at their feet’ (Charles 2013).

Elite studies are still relatively underdeveloped compared to the ‘classic’ research about youth and education, which predominantly has focused on working class young people (see Hall & Jefferson 1976; Willis 1977). Research on privileged youth with attention to structure
and agency does not have the same import as these well-known studies (Charles 2013). The significance of conducting further research into the lives of privileged young women implements an essential ‘top-down’ approach to qualitative research that begs the question: if the most privileged in society cannot embody these standards, who can? Further, a top-down approach through the lens of practice helps to further illuminate how gender domination is disseminated through class lines (as well as distinctions of ethnicity, race, and so forth). How gender norms are re-articulated and negotiated by social agents in varying fields, though the schooling field, in particular, is crucial to understanding the current shape of “successful womanhood”.

I am aware that this study examines only a very small echelon of society, and additional factors of race, ethnicity, and class, would have to be considered in future research. This narrow demographic of elite womanhood obviously does not reflect a majority of girls’ experiences from differing schooling social fields. Nonetheless, future research in the realm of girlhood and feminist education studies may find this multifaceted verbal and visual design approach useful towards better understanding the complexities of growing up girl. While the framework would have to be altered, ideal standards of femininity permeate across multiple cultural contexts and can thus be studied from numerous angles. Due to this ubiquitousness, there is certainly more work to be done in exploring how girls experience gendered expectations, from different schooling sectors to different cultures. By broadening the scope of this design approach, researchers can better understand the intersectionality of gender with other fields of oppression. The further exploration of “successful womanhood” in schools may therefore offer a vast cross-section of examples rather than an intimate focus on a few.

The re-production of liberal-conservative political ideologies emerged as a notable theme throughout the data. Evidenced in comments regarding the conservative clientele that this schooling context serves, markedly condemning ‘all this women’s business’. In the interest of
maintaining focus on the specific re-production of womanhood, this area of political re-production remains largely unexplored in this thesis. Further investigation into parental influence and the surrounding conservative communities would no doubt provide fruitful insights into a class analysis of womanhood in elite education studies. Such future directions should seek to better understand the dialectics of liberalism, privilege, and conservatism – which reflect some of the liberalism within the Australian political climate.

This thesis has expanded on the notion of ambivalence, touched on in a body of feminist scholarship, to demonstrate its usefulness in conceptualising how privileged young women embody and enact the competing “split” social forces characteristic of these late modern times. The operationalisation of ambivalence is still a rather untapped resource that helps to demonstrate the embodied dispositions of young femininities in relation to broader late modern social forces. While ambivalent social positioning was significant in helping to understand aporetic graduate experiences, this thesis presents only a broad foundation for future studies that may benefit from a focused-approach to identity-formation and ambivalence in late modernity.

Because this project focused predominantly on girls’ schools, I recommend that future studies explore the ideal standards of manhood in elite boys’ schools. Additionally, a comparative analysis of both elite boys’ and girls’ school contexts is recommended for larger-scale projects. Previous studies indicate the productiveness in analysing these distinct masculine and feminine schooling social fields (Gottschall et al. 2010). Namely, such comparisons illuminate the differing ways girls and boys enact sexuality to perform normative gender ideals. Additionally, studies can compare the gendered rhetoric employed by schools that shape young men and women’s divergent habitus. The value of furthering understandings of
contemporary femininities (and masculinities), is to help identify the dialectics of structure-versus-agency that inform the more damaging traditional gender ideals. Thus, school and government policies may be implemented to effectively synergise with these dialectics and help to foster change. The lack of representation of women in leadership is still a prevalent issue across the world that stalls any significant advancements in bridging the divide between structural gender inequalities and women’s claims and expectations.

Image analysis has been underutilised in elite and education fields and could be greatly expanded beyond the scope of this study. School marketing through brochures, billboards, and numerous other visual means of self-representation, could also be explored. Social media raises another complexity to the visual culture of these schools. How schools and students use social media may help to illuminate the ways such aesthetics are interpreted and operationalised by social agents outside the schooling field. Comparative studies with regional and public schools is also recommended. There is a stark contrast between the promotional materials in different schooling sectors. This presents a poignant disparity in the ideological foundations between schooling sectors. The ways different schools choose to represent themselves and the messages they project through aesthetics all contribute to their schooling social field and thus the student experience. An extensive image analysis of a variety of schools would provide a rich tapestry of marketing rhetoric and an important foundation in the fields of education, social aesthetics, and semiotics.

Moving beyond the schooling context, it would be fruitful to map out the life pathways of girls within this “ideal” dominant social grouping. This thesis presents an important starting point for longitudinal research into how young women transition from elite schooling into various career and family pathways. Having touched on the imagined futures of the
participants, this is an important step in understanding the sorts of perceived opportunities and outcomes these young women perceive as available to them according to their gendered (and classed) habitus. Focus on the transitions girls make from elite schools to life post-school is certainly under-researched and the findings of this thesis present a powerful case for a doctoral thesis in this topic.

By addressing young women’s perceptions and the social formations that contribute to them in school, the divide between school gendered rhetoric and student experience may be bridged. Thus, these elite girls’ schools - and all schools for that matter – may offer girls better training towards becoming women, amid the plethora of contradictions that make up “successful womanhood”.
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