# "I Am Not A *Girlie Girl!*": Young Women's Negotiation of Feminine Powerlessness

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## Abstract

"I Am Not A *Girlie Girl*", an emphatic rejection of one feminine prototype conceptualised by a group of 29 female emerging adults (18-25) participating in my larger PhD investigation into the relevance of perceptions of gender identity to experiences of interpersonal communication conflict. Using feminist post structuralist discourse analysis, these young women's talk was examined, in depth, in an effort to understand their perceptions of femininity. They identified seven feminine identities evident in Trinidad society but it is the "*girlie girl*" which became a prototype for rejection. This prototype, these Trinidadian young women defined as a form of extreme femininity, preoccupied with the production and maintenance of physical appearance and beauty and inherently stupid or ignorant. Their conversation during focus groups revealed an expressed negative attitude, overt rejection and emphatic and emotive negation of the "*girlie girl*" with careful rationalisation of a more acceptable idiosyncratic, neutral or masculine typical gender identity for self. For these tertiary level students, the physically beautiful "*girlie girl*" has power but that which makes her powerful also makes her powerless. The beautiful woman is ideal and prestigious but is also considered a threat to be controlled.  The "*girlie girl*" is denied self-actualisation and accomplishment because while she is expected to be beautiful, once she is deemed to be such she is made passive, weak and dependent. As one respondent concluded "women can't have it all you can't be pretty and you can't be smart… something have to be wrong with you".

**Keywords:** femininity, *Girlie Girl*, gender identity, Trinidad and Tobago, feminist post structuralist feminist discourse analysis, emerging adults

## Introduction

"Women can't have it all", a sentiment expressed by a group of young women who emphatically reject the *girlie girl* feminine identity or, in general terms, hyperfemininity. These 18–25 year-old emerging adult[1] women, enrolled at The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus at the time, gathered to discuss their perceptions of gender identity as part of a set of focus group discussions on the relevance of perceptions of gender identity to experiences of interpersonal communication conflict. These young women were not at the time negotiating the ongoing work/life/family balance conundrum[2] which usually invokes the question, can women have it all?  Instead they were grappling with a binary that has consistently mediated femininity – beauty versus brains. These young Trinidadians assert the position that the pretty, hyperfeminine woman occupies a contentious space, at once idealised and granted privilege because of her appearance while, for the same reason, being denied self-actualisation and accomplishment. For them, a woman who is both intelligent and committed to maintaining beauty presents an anomaly; as one put it, "something [has] to be wrong with you". Therefore they attempt to circumvent this through emphatic rejection or negation of the *girlie girl* feminine identity, tempered acceptance of *girlie girl* habits as part of their own femininity, or conditional claims to masculine-marked behaviour.

Thus this paper describes how, through conversation, these women trouble their feminine identifications. It demonstrates how they experience gender identity as a place of ambivalence as they contend with the inescapable influence of hyperfemininity and wanting "to have it all". Representation of their perceptions is facilitated through multi-level – micro, meso and macro[3] – Feminist Post-Structuralist Discourse Analysis (FPDA). Therefore the young women's positioning of self and other is viewed as constantly renegotiated during the process of interaction and their talk is interpreted through a self-reflexive deconstructive process that focuses on uncovering the multiple gendered knowledges/ discourses, ideologies, subjective positions, identities and relationships

negotiated (Baxter 2003; Sunderland 2006; Cameron 2001; Van Dijk 1997). Questioned is how normative discourses and other competing yet interwoven discourses complicate perceptions of self and other and discussed are the relevant linguistic features, speech activities and patterns of verbal interaction which facilitated the detection of these discourses. This analysis follows a brief overview of the concepts and discourses which serve as the lens through which the young women's assertions are read.

**Hyperfemininity and the Beauty versus Brains Binary**

According to Paecther (2010) the *girlie girl* is "a particular embodiment of hyper-femininity" (4) or, in Reay's (2001) words, it is an "emphasised femininity" which features a heavy involvement in the gender work that inscribes hyperfemininity and subjects it to discourses of denigration such as the perception of "girlies" as "stupid and dumb". Hyperfemininity is an exaggerated adherence to a stereotypic feminine gender role which makes especially salient sexual appeal and heterosexual relationships (Matschiner and Murnen 1999; McKelvie and Gold 1994; Maybach and Gold 1994), and is often constructed as feminine typical. To be feminine typical is to be gender typical, which, as a discourse, emerged from developmental psychology and accounts for ideas and practices that inform an individual's perception of self as similar or compatible to members of their claimed sex/gender category (Bussey 2011). Therefore the individual is able to assess whether or not they fit in with others of their sex/gender in-group, whether they enjoy doing and excel at the same things done by their in-group members, and ultimately whether their gender performance represents a valid prototype of their in-group (Newman and Newman 2009).

The prototype of relevance is femininity[4]. However, in the case of hyperfemininity as it is invoked by the *girlie girl* feminine identity, a very specific prototype is made salient. Its embodiment and behaviour are defined similarly in the

literature (Holland and Harpin 2015; Kester 2015; Thompson 2012; Paechter 2010; Geneve et al. 2008; Wagner 2007; Reay 2001) as it is by the young Trinidadian women in this study, that is, as preoccupied with the production and maintenance of physical appearance, stupid or unaware, and unable, at times, to communicate effectively with males. This definition invokes the beauty versus brains binary which constructs hyperfemininity as oppositional. For example, Murnen and Seabrook (2012) explain that "while achieving a sexy body might gain women a sense of control and some attention from others, it will lead to little real respect or power...although women are supposed to focus on appearance, they are ridiculed for doing so" (439). Others explain the relationship similarly, such as Gonsalves (2012) in her study of discourses of gender and competence in physics, Barnard et al. (2012) in their study of engineering and gender in higher education, and Toor (2009) in her examination of teacher attitudes to the relationship between intelligence and looks.

The beauty versus brains binary is reproduced and reinforced in popular culture and as a result is often the focus of evaluations within media. For example, *The Economist* suggests that attractive women should not include a photo with a job application because the "dumb blonde hypothesis[5]" is often applied to them with people assuming their stupidity (2012). Ciapponi (2014) testifies to this in a narrative written for *The Huffington Post* expressing the sentiment "I was pretty; therefore my main talent in life seemed to be sexually exciting strange men...I may as well write 'please tell me I'm smart' on my forehead". *Elite Daily*, in its examination of the relationship status of smart women, cites Dr. Eileen Pollack's assertion that there is a cultural paradigm that maintains that "you can't be smart and sexy" (2014). *Psychology Today* explains the "more attractive = less intelligent" intuition, which runs counter to the halo effect (attractive people are perceived as more sincere and intelligent) and imposes an attractiveness penalty on women especially, makes them feel that they are not taken as seriously as they should because of their attractiveness (Raghunathan, 2011). The BBC Future online magazine discusses this penalty further stating that while beauty may pay in most circumstances "implicit sexist prejudices can work

against attractive women making them less likely to be hired for high-level jobs that require authority" (Robson 2015).

This dichotomy which contrasts beauty and brains is grounded in gender polarisation as a structure that organises social life around gender/sex difference and foregrounds the patriarchal power relations and inequalities which mediate this organisation (McIlvenny 2002; Bing and Bergvall 1998). It is through the concept of gender polarisation that the expected powerlessness for women and girls becomes visible, making salient the limits placed on opportunities and access to many spheres of social life and revealing the reliance on the discourse of biological determinism to justify such limits (Bing and Bergvall 1998). It is this powerlessness that the young Trinidadian women resist in their talk.

**The Women: "I Am Not A *Girlie Girl*"**

The explanations and illustrations[6] shared by this selection of four women from two focus groups work together to demonstrate how consistently the *girlie girl* feminine identity troubles and leaves them in a state of ambivalence. They at once accept *girlie girl* characteristics as outward markers which signal their legitimacy as feminine but reject these characteristics as typical signs of powerlessness and objectification. Their internal characteristics and some external behaviour are decidedly masculine, as far as they are concerned, and distinguish them from hyperfemininity which they see as typical.

Denise[7]: "I do not take that long…I drink manly drinks"

In Fragment One below Denise defines the *girlie girl* as marked by her dedication to maintaining her physical appearance. In lines 4 to 10, 15 and 16, Denise characterises the *girlie girl* using an example of the ritual undertaken by her group of friends in preparation for a night out. Denise perceives the *girlie girl*

as one who "takes forever to get ready" (line 4), "puts on a million different types of cream" (line 15) and has to "do her hair" (line 16). Fundamental is her construction of the *girlie girl* feminine identity as extreme. This reflects Holland and Harpin's (2015) conclusion that the *girlie girl* is "contrived to be a marker of the worst excesses of hegemonic 'femininity'" (293). In the context of the young women's discussion, hyperfemininity becomes hegemonic because it is perceived as feminine typical.

Denise's construction of the *girlie girl* as extreme lies in her use of hyperbole in both lines 4 and 15 – she "takes forever" and "puts on a million" – to describe the behaviour which marks her friend as a *girlie girl*. The use of hyperbole by a speaker indicates an intentional or unintentional exaggeration of the quality of its referent or a positive or negative evaluation of that referent and it intensifies interest in what is being said, grabs the listener's attention and makes the speaker's argument more convincing (Claridge 2011; Mora and Macarro 2004).

**Fragment One**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Denise: | Well (.) °yeah my friends are real° girlie girls= | 1 |
| Sue Ann: | =What's a girlie girl? | 2 |
| Denise: | Ughhhhhhhh (.) alright like the same one who takes- who <u>left</u> me (.) °the bitch° | 3 |
| | (group laughs loudly)) she takes <u>forever</u> to get ready like oh my God | 4 |
| Cindy: | [<u>Yes</u> I kno::::::w] | 5 |
| Denise: | when we have to go out we tell her yeah we coming for you eight when we're | 6 |
| | really coming for her like ten just- and then (.) we'd call her at eight and you | 7 |
| | know we'd be like ok are you ready you coming down and she'd be like ↑oh | 8 |
| | Go::::d I now coming out the showe::::r↑ ((said in high pitched wining voice)) | 9 |
| | well yeah we knew that >we'll be there in 15 minutes eh hurry up< this time | 10 |
| | we re- like I no::::w I lying down watching TV cause I know we really going for | 11 |
| | ten but she's the <u>wo::::rse</u> so (.) what was the question? ((group laughs)) | 12 |
| Sue Ann: | The question is what's a girlie girl?= | 13 |
| Gina: | =What's a girlie girl?= | 14 |
| Denise: | =Oh right so she takes really lo::::ng cause she has to put on a million | 15 |
| | different types of cream and a ho- like do her hai::::r and I like yeah ((pauses | 16 |
| | and looks around pointedly, thumps desk decisively but gently)) I do not take | 17 |
| | <u>that</u> long= | 18 |
| Several: | =Yes yeah | 19 |
| Denise: | to get ready at all | 20 |

Denise's explicit negation complemented by her non-verbal gestures and her use of interjections convey, more powerfully, her rejection of the *girlie girl*. But the second part of the phrase "that long" (line 18) introduces a counteracting idea. Indeed, Denise's stress on the demonstrative determiner "that" conveys her rejection of the length of time taken by the *girlie girl* because, according to Swan (1995), speakers use "that" in this way to show dislike or rejection. And her non-verbal language in lines 16 and 17 of Fragment One above complements this rejection. Her pause and slow surveillance of the group gives them time to grasp her prior description of the *girlie girl*. Then her quick sharp striking of the table, an emphasising gesture according to Sharma and Mohan (2011), alerts the group to her response and affirms the decisiveness of the statement that follows. At the same time Denise's phrase "that long" also functions like an indefinite quantifier indirectly indicating the length of time she actually takes (Downing and Locke 2006). With this emphasis – she stresses "that" – she does not exclude herself entirely from the *girlie girl* practice. Denise may not take as long as her *girlie girl* friend to get ready but she constructs herself as spending some time engaging in the grooming behaviour done by the *girlie girl*. Indirectly, Denise attributes *girlie girl* behaviour to self. Whether this is intentional or not is unclear but this short phrase tempers Denise's rejection of *girlie girl* behaviour.

Her indirect attribution of some degree of *girlie girl* behaviour to herself does not completely overturn her negative attitude to this feminine identity. Denise's use of the interjections "ugh" (line 3) and "oh my God" (line 5) reinforce her negative attitude. Interjections function as an index of the speaker's emotional state, indicating intensity of feeling and attitude toward the referent (Aijmer 2004). "Ugh" is an expression of disgust, the sound imitating the noise of retching (Stange 2009). The breathiness added to Denise's utterance of "ugh" intensifies the retching sound and emphasises her emotive display of disgust. "Oh my God" is an exclamation which conveys annoyance or surprise and is used as mild swearing by speakers (Swan 1995; Aijmer 2004). In the context of Denise's narrative its use as an expression of annoyance is more relevant.

Throughout Fragment One above Denise's peers support her assertions. Cindy engages in collaborative overlap in line 5, confirming that the *girlie girl* "takes forever" – "yes I know", she agrees that this knowledge is shared. Then everyone agrees with Denise's rejection of the *girlie girl* and the length of time she takes to get ready; "yes yeah" they all reply in line 18. Denise's talk also conveys not only her negative attitude and evaluation of the *girlie girl* but, importantly, it conveys how Denise would like the other members of the focus group to interpret the nature of the *girlie girl* as well as her perception of that nature. I read these meta-messages from her repair[8] in line 3 and her seemingly clarifying question in line 12.

In line 3, after her emotive display "ugh", Denise pauses and then inserts the discourse marker "alright" which can signal a change of subject (Swan 1995), but in this case it signals her yielding to the change I initiated (Downing and Locke 2006). Having sent this signal, Denise then proceeds to describe the *girlie girl* by using a friend she mentioned in previous conversation as a prototype – "like the same one". It is the rephrasing that follows that is significant. Denise begins to clarify which friend she is referring to, "the same one who takes", but then stops abruptly and says "who left me". She then labels this friend using the impolite, "the bitch[9]", which draws loud laughter from the group. Her rephrasing here changes the focus from a description of the *girlie girl*, which would have answered my question directly, to a reintroduction of the offensive behaviour – her friend left her waiting at a night club to spend more time with a strange man – which she said caused an incident of conflict between her and her friend.

Denise's redesign of her message in line 3 of Fragment One suggests a change of focus with the function of a contextualisation convention, which, especially in its place at the beginning of Denise's description of the *girlie girl*, works as a signal that orients the group to the complexity of the attitude and identity in play in the conversation (Gumperz 1982; Auer 2002). Denise primes the group to interpret the *girlie girl* as even more unacceptable because of how the gender-

marked insult "bitch" is layered onto Denise's subsequent characterisation and evaluation of the *girlie girl*.

Denise in Fragment Two below also constructs herself as feminine atypical and masculine. Denise constructs herself as masculine in terms of her physical appearance, the role she performs in her peer group and her preference for certain alcoholic drinks. In terms of appearance, Denise perceives herself as masculine because she is tall – "the "giant lady" – in comparison to her diminutive friends who are "cute", "little", and "*fru fru*[10]" (line 1). Denise also perceives herself as masculine because she takes on "the protector" role, preventing unsuitable men – "grimy fellas" (line 4), "yucky people" (line 16) – from pursuing her *girlie girl* friends.

**Fragment Two**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Denise: | Hhhhhh ok so we go out and they are like- they cute they little and they | 1 |
| | and thing ((group laughs)) all of that *fru fru* thing right (.) I'm the giant lady | 2 |
| | when we go out so I wear heels too so they are like little and then these kinda | 3 |
| | grimy fellas | 4 |
| Sue Ann: | [shhhew] | 5 |
| Cindy: | [grimy?] | 6 |
| Denise: | does wanna come on them and then I's just be like ((folds arms, leans back and | 7 |
| | looks stern)) and then they go- they watch me an' then they like just like £turn | 8 |
| | and walk off£ so yea::h they actually told me that the other night like *horse* | 9 |
| | you's real *cock block* I was like I'm protecting you all and they are like well (.) | 10 |
| | >is ok< and then we have another friend who's with us a lot, a guy, a::nd I's like | 11 |
| | well ↑?????? don't do anything↑ he's like you all are big women if all you want | 12 |
| | to go and **palance** yourself go an pala- an I's like but no::::: you supposed to | 13 |
| | protect them from these (.)= | 14 |
| Cindy: | =Goons | 15 |
| Denise: | yucky people ((group snickers)) that wanna come over and be all on them and | 16 |
| | just like protect them a lot= | 17 |
| Sue Ann: | =Yeah yeah | 18 |
| Denise: | and I drink "manly" ((makes quotes with fingers)) drinks cause I like Scotch= | 19 |
| Sue Ann: |                              [What's a manly drink?] | 20 |
| Gina: | =What's a manly drink? | 21 |
| Denise: | like I like Scotch and they like Vodka | 22 |
| Lauren: | [Hard liquor] | 23 |

It is evident that Denise perceives her hyperfeminine friends in line with one traditional and stereotypical perception of femininity, i.e. a woman who cannot protect herself from men. In her role as protector, her friends accuse her of intercepting their establishment of relations with men – "*horse*[11] you's real *cock block*" (line 10, Fragment Two). Thus, as "*cock blocker*" she can be said to function similarly to the traditional chaperone who is, stereotypically, an older female; or her actions may be interpreted as those of a male competing for the attentions of a female which is more in keeping with the modern slang meaning of "*cock block*", which in Trinidad is used in the context of a bar, night club or party to refer to a man who stands in the way of another man's sexual advances on a woman.

Savannah: "I'm not the type…I'm pretty hardcore on the inside"

Savannah, in Fragment Three below, also shifts between rejection and acceptance of the *girlie girl* feminine identity, conveying a sense of 'I am but I'm not'. In lines 1, 2, 6, 10, and 12 Savannah distinguishes herself from the *girlie girl* through the use of negation. The first part of each phrase contains a complete or contracted negative verb form – "I'm not the type" (repeated twice in lines 1 & 2), "I do not like" (line 6), "I don't like" (line 10), "I don't need" (repeated three times in lines 10 & 12). These encode Savannah's negation and convey her perception of herself as distinct from that which characterises the *girlie girl* – "the nails" and "the hairstyles" (line 2), "primping and prepping" (line 6), "shopping" (lines 7 & 10), needing "nice things" and "fancy things" (lines 10 & 12), "threading in the latest fashion" (line 14). Her complete phrase in each of these lines functions as a negative declarative which has the force of rejection (Downing and Locke 2006).

| **Fragment Three** | |
|---|---|
| Savannah:   in terms of femininity I would say (0.2) hmm (.) well I'm not the type | **1** |
| to do up the nails (.) I'm not the type to have the hairstyles even | **2** |
| though people say my hairstyle change every time they see me but is | **3** |
| just that I (.) I can't have something for too long (.) I like change | **4** |
| Sue Ann:   Right | **5** |
| Savannah:   But I'm not into primping and prepping myself as a typical girl (.) I <u>do</u> | **6** |
| <u>not</u> like shopping | **7** |
| Sue Ann:   Oh dear ((group laughs)) | **8** |
| Madison:   [Hear hear] | **9** |
| Savannah:   I don't (.) I don't like shopping and I don't need the nice things I don't | **10** |
| Madison:                                     [I need | **11** |
| Savannah:   need the fancy things or whatever whatever I don't need to be | **12** |
| Madison:   the nice things I just don't want to shop for them] | **13** |
| Savannah:   threading in the latest fashion and all of those I just want to be | **14** |
| comfortable and I'm comfortable with the simplest stuff | **15** |

Savannah does not articulate any particular feminine identity as representative of self. In fact she seems to still be thinking about this as she stalls in line 5 of the fragment, "in terms of femininity I would say, hmm, well", her tentativeness evident in her use of the vocal filler "hmm", hedge "well" and long pause as she takes time to decide what she "would say" about her femininity. When she describes herself she constructs her preferences as idiosyncratic and gender neutral – "I can't have something for too long", "I like change", "I just want to be comfortable" – the "just" in the last phrase indicates that nothing more than personal taste constitutes her. She does not use the word "type" as she did when characterising the *girlie girl* and thus does not invoke the relevance of a particular prototypical or stereotypical social identity.

But even as she does not articulate the substance of her femininity, Savannah makes it clear that she is not the *girlie girl* since she neither "likes" nor "needs" the things associated with *girlie girls*. Her rejection of the *girlie girl* appears just as emphatic though not as emotive as Denise's rejection because the repeated pattern of her phrases, e.g. "I'm not the type" or "I don't need", in each of the above lines and the repetition of the negative verb forms, e.g. "I do not, I don't", intensifies the import of her negative statements. At the same time, like Denise, Savannah's exclusion of *girlie girl* femininity from her gender identity is not quite complete. In lines 3 and 4 of Fragment Three above she acknowledges how she may embody one stereotypical marker of *girlie girl* femininity. Savannah says "though people say my hairstyle change every time they see me", which indicates that even though she is "not the type to have the hairstyles" her hairstyle choices are significant enough to be noticed and possibly cast her as the type. "Though" in Savannah's statement is a conjunction which conveys concession or emphasises contrast (Downing and Locke 2006; Swan 1995). Therefore, here Savannah's language indicates that she concedes that the *girlie girl* feminine identity is relevant to her own identity, at least as far as it is perceived by others. In addition, her use of the distributive determiner "every" quantifies the number of times her hairstyle changes and, in its usage here, conveys the notion of generality or totality (Swan 1995; Downing and Locke 2006). What this does in the statement is to generalise hairstyle change as part of her performance of self thus making her "the type" to "have the hairstyles".

Savannah's citation of how she may be perceived by others acknowledges the relevance of *girlie girl* femininity to her gender identity but does not constitute her acceptance of this femininity. Indeed, Savannah attempts to overturn the apparent relevance of the *girlie girl* to self by asserting a counteracting construction. She says "but" (a conjunction which introduces a contradictory idea) "is just that" or it is only a matter of personal taste – she "can't have something for too long", she "likes change". However, her rejection of the *girlie girl* remains incomplete because her citation of how others may perceive her

sends a meta-message that her performance of self is not entirely unmarked by *girlie girl* characteristics, however stereotypical these may be.

Incidentally, Madison's talk in Fragment Two above also reflects some contradiction as she shifts between acceptance of one stereotypically *girlie girl* feature "liking nice things" and rejection of the equally stereotypical *girlie girl* practice – "shopping[12]" which tends to facilitate the acquisition of "nice things". Madison's talk draws attention to the instability of the stereotypical characterisation of femininity. Madison can quite comfortably admit that she is "the type" to like nice things but she emphatically agrees with Savannah's dislike for shopping, cheering "hear hear".

In Fragment Four below, Savannah mirrors Denise's speech act observed earlier by also constructing herself as masculine while reminding the group that she is still quite feminine. In this fragment Savannah explains an earlier assertion that she was more masculine than feminine. She claims – "I like" – what she perceives and believes the other group members perceive as normative masculine behaviour – "that hardcore what you know normally associated with guys" (line 1). The discourse marker "you know" conveys her assumption of shared knowledge and the adverb "normally" denotes "hardcore" – "playing video games" – as typical masculine behaviour.

| Fragment Four | |
|---|---|
| Savannah:  I like all that (.) that hardcore what you know normally associated with guys | **1** |
| (.) I will play video games °£and whup their ass£° ((group laughs)) so:::::: I | **2** |
| guess that's what's masculine about me am I'm not afraid (.) to (.) romp (.) | **3** |
| with a guy (.) ((shrugs)) I'm just <u>not</u> (.) I mean (.) I look I look quite feminine | **4** |
| like (.) you know (.) but I I I'm pretty hardcore on the on the inside | **5** |

Savannah also adds to her characterisation of self as masculine by citing her ability to compete with males and be triumphant – "and whup their ass" (line 2) – as well as her disregard for feminine containment when interacting with males – "I'm not afraid" (line 3). In line 3 of Fragment Four Savannah states that "she's not afraid to romp with a guy", she is "just not" (line 4). Here Savannah attempts to qualify her assertion that "she is not afraid…" but she does not introduce any new information, rather she adds emphasis through repetition of an ellipsis of her original statement. Her use of "just" quantifies her lack of fear as absolute, she is nothing more than fearless. Her shrug indicates her inability to determine any alternative explanation as relevant.

What is important is that Savannah's insistence that she is "not afraid to romp with guys" conveys the idea that she is brave enough to breach a prohibition cast against women and girls, i.e. "romping with guys" is not gender appropriate. Not being afraid to "romp", not being afraid to engage in aggressive play with guys can only be extraordinary because she holds this attitude as a member of the female/feminine in-group and not a member of the male/masculine in-group. Though there has been much criticism of the idea, male bonding through aggression, e.g. coordinated fighting and hunting, hostility and displays of masculine strength, remains a stereotypical representation of exclusively male/masculine behaviour (Kimmel and Aronson 2004).

Savannah's dual construction of self is also clear in lines 4 and 5 of Fragment Four above where she sets up an inside/outside contrast, admitting to an embodied femininity – "I look quite feminine" – but claiming a masculinity that is internal – "I'm pretty hardcore on the inside". Also through the use of the discourse marker "I mean" at the beginning of her phrase, Savannah indicates that she is clarifying the actual meaning she wants the group to interpret (Swan 1995, 156) – that she still recognises the stereotypical markers of feminine on self. Uncertainty is also a feature of Savannah's talk and this indicates her ambivalence about her gender identity. From lines 1 to 5 Savannah pauses

frequently, she uses tentative language such as "I guess" (line 2), she hesitates (for example her lengthening of "so" in line 2) and her speech is not fluent because she appears to stammer – repeating "that" (line 1) "I look" (line 4) and "I" (line 5) – and hedges "you know" and "like" (lines 1 & 4).

Farah: "I have my 'dumb blonde' moments but I don't think I'm a *girlie girl*"

Farah in Fragment Five below expresses a different type of rejection of the *girlie girl*. Unlike Denise and Savannah, Farah has claimed the *girlie girl* feminine identity as representative of her feminine identity. I encourage her to take the floor in line 1 because she is the only respondent who makes such a claim. But even as Farah claims to be a *girlie girl* she rejects that part of the *girlie girl* identity that all female participants are particularly wary of, the *girlie girl's* supposed stupidity.

| **Fragment Five** | |
|---|---|
| Sue Ann:        So let's hear from the girlie girl or the self acclaimed- | **1** |
| Farah:          I have <u>many</u> dumb blonde moments ((group laughs)) but I don't I don't- | **2** |
| Madison:                                      [You see] | **3** |
| Farah:          no pause (.) but I don't think that's because I'm a girlie girl I just  think is | **4** |
|                  because I'm silly and I'm a clown and if you say something sometimes I | **5** |
|                  will just like be silly and not on purpose but sometimes (.) li::ke (.) ʊ:::::h | **6** |
|                  what? (.) and it will come across as dumb blonde but is just I just think I | **7** |
|                  am clownish an' silly | **8** |

In earlier conversation the speakers used the nominalisation "the dumb blonde" to define the *girlie girl* prototype. Denotatively, "the dumb blonde" is a stereotype which constructs an exclusive ethnic in-group. According to Kuhn and Radstone (1990) "dumb blondes" are white women with blonde hair who are characterised by "overt 'natural' sexuality (of which they may or may not be aware) with a profound ignorance and innocence manifest in an inability to understand even the most elementary facts of everyday life" (47). They are historically stereotyped as attractive flirts, less intelligent and competent, dim-witted, and "reduced to another stereotypic subtype of female: the attractive, if lobotomised, nymphomaniac" because she might "otherwise pose a powerful sexual or emotional threat" (Greenwood and Isbell 2002, 342; Thomas 2003; Beddow et al. 2011).

That these respondents find "the dumb blonde" stereotype relevant to them as non-white, non-North American/European females is not just the effect of the ubiquity of this stereotype but because of the way the "dumb blonde" character has been dehumanised and has been used to describe abstract ideas such as the universal subordination of Western women or a feminine syndrome with the main symptom being inherent stupidity (Barrat 1986; Hatfield and Sprecher 1986). Farah and her colleagues invoke the "dumb blonde" as a concept which connotes a generalised and subordinate femininity and ignore the ethnic/racial/national identities associated with the "dumb blonde".

Farah rejects in Fragment Five above the stability of stupidity or "profound ignorance" as a marker of her feminine identity. Farah insists that her "many dumb blonde moments" are distinct from her gender identity – "I don't think that's because I'm a *girlie girl"* (line 4). Though Farah constructs her "dumb blonde moments" as frequent, she stresses "many", she also constructs it as fleeting or not sustained as part of her everyday performance of self. The noun "moments" in this phrase indicates that while she appears as a "dumb blonde" often this is only apparent at particular instances in time. Farah prefers to construct her "dumb blonde moments" as play – "I just think is because I'm silly

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and I'm a clown" (lines 4 and 5), a notion she reinforces in line 7 – "is just I just think I am clownish an' silly". Her repeated insertion of "just" in these statements that explain the cause of her behaviour fulfils the function of a focusing adverb which conveys a restriction of the scope of the referent (Downing and Locke 2006). It also diminishes the import of her statements. Farah also constructs her "dumb blonde" behaviour as unintentional or just play rather than a case of ignorance. As she explains it, her tendency to need clarification – "like uh what?" – is "not on purpose" (line 6), it is trivial – "I will just like be silly" (line 6).

Like her peers, Farah is committed to her rejection. Her repetition of the restrictive "just" emphasises how irrelevant the "dumb blonde" stereotype is to her *girlie girl* feminine identity. In addition, Farah silences Madison's confirmation of her admission of the relevance of the "dumb blonde" as she tells Madison "no pause" in line 4, cutting Madison's collaborative overlap and preventing the conversation from following the direction indicated by Madison's comment. Farah retains control of the floor to assert her particular position, i.e. while she is a *girlie girl* she is not the persistently "profoundly ignorant" "dumb blonde".

Sandy: "So I wouldn't say I'm completely *girlie girlie*…sometimes I act like a *fella*[13]". Sandy, in Fragment Six below, is able to blur the boundaries of hyperfemininity and achieve a greater sense of agency for herself. Before giving any details of her perception of herself, Sandy declares "I can't really define which category I fall into" (line 1), then shifts between constructing her gender identity as feminine typical (citing how her femininity is embodied) and constructing herself as feminine atypical (citing her lack of dedication to cultivating an attractive appearance and her tendency to engage in male heterosexual mating behaviour).

| **Fragment Six** | |
|---|---|
| Sandy: I can't really define (.) which category I fall un- into <by just looking at me | 1 |
| you might think yeah she's a *girlie girl* most of the time cause I's mostly | 2 |
| always have on skirts or dresses or something like that but I wouldn't | 3 |
| really see myself as being *girlie girlie* cause sometimes I just (.) I don't | 4 |
| feel to:::: (.) I don't know dress up put on makeup or stuff like that and | 5 |
| a::m I- to me sometimes I's act I's act (.) °like° (.) ((questioning | 6 |
| expression)) like a a fella sometimes in terms of things I may sa:::y a::m | 7 |
| <just off of wildness sake I will stand up with other fellas and be | 8 |
| pretending like I watching girls or something like that just off of kicks | 9 |
| ((Stacy, Lauren, Cindy and Kelsey exchange questioning looks)) so I | 10 |
| wouldn't say I'm completely *girlie girlie* although I look like it | 11 |

Sandy states that she "would not really see myself as being *girlie girlie*" (lines 3, 4) because she does not always engage in stereotypical *girlie girl* behaviour – "sometimes I just don't feel to dress up, put on makeup or stuff like that" – and sometimes she joins "fellas" in "watching girls" (line 9) which, for her, constitutes "acting like a fella" (lines 6 and 7). At the same time, she also declares that she "looks" like the *girlie girl* – "by just looking at me you might think yeah she's a *girlie girl*…cause I's mostly always have on skirts or dresses" (line 2 and 3). Sandy evaluates her perception of her gender identity as wavering in lines 10 and 11 – "I wouldn't say I'm completely *girlie girlie* although I look like it". The conjunction "although" conveys the contrast between her perception of her gendered performance and her actual performance. Her use of these declarative phrases asserts a perception of her gender identity as dual; she acts masculine but her everyday gender performance – dress in particular – is feminine.

Sandy's use of the modal auxiliary "would" in its negative form – "wouldn't" lines 3 and 4 of Fragment Six above – "I wouldn't really see myself as being *girlie girlie*" and "so I wouldn't say I'm completely *girlie girlie*" – conveys her assertion as a condition based on lived experience (Declerck 2011). It suggests the normativity of what Sandy expects but it produces this as a tentative or counterfactual interpretation (Declerck 2011; Downing and Locke, 2006). By using the negative form Sandy distances herself from the *girlie girl* but since it is conditional this rejection is not constructed as something that is, but rather something that is uncertain; her "not saying" or "not seeing" indicates only her conclusion, encoded in "so" in the second phrase, about her possible actions (Declerck 2011). Sandy's phrasing tempers her rejection of the *girlie girl* feminine identity.

Sandy's use of time and frequency adverbs in lines 2 and 4 to 6 of Fragment Six above is the second telling linguistic feature that complements her explicit statements. These adverbs (Downing and Locke 2006) set up a contrast between her habitual behaviour and her occasional behaviour. What she constructs as habitual in effect does more than temper her rejection of the *girlie girl* feminine identity; it counteracts this rejection. When Sandy describes her feminine typical gender performance that is visible for perception by others she emphasises the habitual nature of this performance through the combined use of the frequency adverbs "mostly" and "always" – she "mostly always have on skirts or dresses" (line 2,3, Fragment Six). "Mostly" indicates that wearing normatively feminine dress is her main behaviour and "always" indicates that this behaviour is done without exception. Her use of the adjective "most" in the preceding phrase "most of the time" also conveys this meaning. But when Sandy describes her feminine atypical gender performance she emphasises the indefinite and transient nature of this performance through the repeated use of the adverb of time "sometimes" – "sometimes I don't feel to…" (line 4) "sometimes I's act…" (line 6), "…like a fella sometimes" (line 7). Sandy's language reinforces stereotypical femininity as normative and masculinity as a deviation from this norm.

Sandy, as female, resists the confines of her normative gender category by claiming masculinity but she is in turn subject to the counter-resistance posed by traces of dominant discourses that impinge upon her ability to be resistant. As Baxter (2003) explains, individuals are shaped by the possibility of multiple (although not limitless) subject positions within and across different and competing discourses. In lines 6 to 11 of Fragment Six above Sandy explains that she sometimes "acts like a fella" by "pretending like I watching girls". "Watching", when used in Trinidad in this context means more than just the act of looking but extends to looking with desire. "Watching" invokes scopophilia as a decidedly masculine act. Scopophilia or the scopophilic gaze was first asserted by feminist theorist Laura Mulvey to describe, in part, the sexual pleasure that heterosexual men take in looking at women, usually those that are deemed beautiful (O'Brien 2009). Both Sandy and her peers perceive the sexual connotations that lie in the verb "watching" and are discomforted by it even though she constructs her "watching" as a pretense.

Sandy's statement makes her perceivable as gay and so she hastily rejects any such perception by mitigating it. First Sandy introduces her action tentatively – "I may say am" (line 7) – with the modal auxiliary verb "may" making her act appear less persistent and more of a matter of chance or only a possibility (Swan 1995) and her lengthening of "say" and "am" indicating that she is stalling, taking time to construct her statement. Then she hurriedly qualifies her statement "just off of wildness sake" and repeats this qualification in line 8 "just off of kicks". "Just" in these phrases restricts her action as play, a meaning conveyed by the combined use of "wildness" and "kicks". In Trinidad Creole these words carry unique meanings and refer to non-serious acts such as joking, teasing or foolish or silly behaviour; as Winer (2009) defines, to "not take seriously; fool around…thrill; excitement" (494). "Sake" in the first phrase reinforces that the reason for her action is only in the interest of play. Sandy sends a meta-message to counteract her basic message, i.e. I am not seriously looking with desire even though my statement implies this. But her peers are not quite convinced as they express their confusion and discomfort by directing

questioning looks at each other (wide eyes, raised eyebrows followed by frowns and pouts[14]).

Sandy's mitigation and her peers' reaction call attention to the influence of the discourse of heteronormativity as a precursor for gender typicality. Though precise definers escape her, Sandy does not wish to assert herself as feminine typical, and she prefers to claim masculinity even though she constructs her masculinity as transient. At the same time, Sandy is unable to accept atypical sexuality. She is determined to locate herself within the heteronormative framework. Her peers are clearly unable to understand any alternative to the prescriptions of this framework as they non-verbally question and disapprove of her implied homosexuality. Homosexuality, as atypical according to dominant ideology, is troubling for these respondents. Therefore there are clearly restrictions on how atypically these speakers may construct themselves.

**Discussion and Conclusion: "Women Can't Have It All"**

The emphatic and at times emotive rejection of the behaviour and characteristics which mark the *girlie girl* is significant but not surprising. It reveals how these young women contend with the discourse of powerlessness that is embedded in discourses of femininity. Power, as it informs my analysis, is not viewed solely as a repressive force. Rather, in keeping with a feminist poststructuralist perspective, it is understood in Foucauldian terms as "a 'net-like organisation' which weaves itself discursively through social organisations, meanings, relations and construction of speakers' subjectivities or identities, with individuals always simultaneously undergoing and exercising power" (Baxter 2003, 8). These women are also contending with a discourse of successful femininity which prescribes for women higher intelligence, feminine agency through education and the independent woman. Therefore contemporary women, especially young women like these students, are expected to be

flexible, individualised, self-driven and self-made, confident, resilient and empowered to achieve a successful femininity or a "carefully balanced and closely self-monitored blend of intelligence, independence, groomed attractiveness and sexiness" (Jackson and Lyons 2013, 228; Budgeon 2011; Pomerantz et al. 2013).

Achieving this careful balance, this "Supergirl" femininity (according to Pomerantz et al. (2013)), this state of "having it all", is clearly not easy as far as the young Trinidadian women are concerned. For them the physically beautiful *girlie girl* has power but that which makes her powerful also makes her powerless; she is caught in a 'Catch22' paradox. This is because the beautiful woman is ideal, she is prestigious because she is considered a natural manifestation of human perfection, and she has privilege because she can seduce and fascinate men (Carbonera 1994) and, I would add, women. However, a beautiful woman is also considered a threat to masculine freedom and autonomy and, therefore, must be controlled. A female, like the *girlie girl*, dedicated to cultivating a beautiful appearance/body is denied self-actualisation and accomplishment because, though she is expected to be beautiful, once determined to be such, she must be, according to Callaghan (1994), "neutralized or made passive, weak and dependent" (ix).

Naomi explains in Fragment Seven below, "women can't have it all you can't be pretty and you can't be smart" (line 1) and if you are, society as the unnamed other – the "they" – are "like no…something have to be wrong with you" (line 4). Naomi is not alone in her view; Mia and Farah support her – "yeah" (line 3).

| Fragment Seven | | |
|---|---|---|
| Naomi:     Because women can't have it all you can't be pretty and you can't be smart= | **1** | |
| Mia:     =Yeah smart at the same time | **2** | |
| Farah:     Yeah | **3** | |
| Naomi:     So they like **no** you have to be- something have to be wrong with you | **4** | |

I suggest that these young women, having set their sights on the opportunities for agency afforded by tertiary education, want to "have it all" though they recognise the persistence of ideas that constrain women especially if they are significantly beautiful. Naomi and her peers were registered full-time students at The University of the West Indies (St. Augustine Campus), and as such they are expected to articulate their intelligence and to use their education to further their professional goals. Expectations may vary depending on the age, class, religion, ethnicity of the woman and the members of her social groups, but cultivating intelligence is crucial to a woman being truly independent. This is part of a larger belief in Caribbean societies that education enhances opportunities for employment and social mobility (Ellis 2003). Therefore it follows that the female focus group respondents would reject any association with lesser intelligence or stupidity even though they acknowledge some participation in the practices that mark the *girlie girl*.

To temper the disempowering effect of hyperfemininity these young women claim a measure of masculinity as part of their atypical feminine identity which follows because, as explained earlier, if the effects of gender polarisation are applied, masculine power is taken for granted. Their understanding of themselves and others is mediated by the power structures and power relations that pervade society. Their awareness of social and biological differences as well as differences in terms of prestige, agency and ultimately power is acute. This may not allow them to "have it all" but they are able to blur the boundaries

of hyperfemininity and achieve a greater sense of agency as women. They pursue this agency constantly hence their rejection of beauty and physical attractiveness, passivity, expressiveness, emotionality and feminine containment, and their claim to masculinity as an alternative source of power.

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[1] The creator of the concept, American developmental psychologist, Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, describes the 'emerging adult' as someone who has more freedom from parental control than an adolescent and thus has greater opportunity for independent exploration (Arnett 2004). This 'emerging adult' may be an individual from 18 to 25 and up to age 30 who engages in identity explorations, experiences instability, is focused on self, experiences a feeling of being between developmental stages (neither adolescent or adult) and has a great belief in possibilities (Arnett 2004, Konstam 2007).

[2] Milestone and Meyer (2012), discuss the "diversification of femininity", particularly the interplay of competing notions of femininity, i.e. a "conventional femininity" – domesticity, marriage and children – and a "freer femininity" – equal rights, opportunities and pleasure seeking as well as more options of identity. But these additional options do not come without challenges, as Brewis (2011) explains, women's actions challenge the "motherhood mandate" and the associated domesticity through decisions to delay children or to remain childless and through insistence on more egalitarian gender ideologies relevant to contraception, abortion, divorce and occupational and educational opportunities. But Brewis (2011) observes, like Milestone and Meyer (2012), that women still "struggle to manage the demands of work, personal relationships of all kinds, motherhood and other life activities" (148).

[3] Analysis at the micro level involves detailed examination of language in use; at the meso level the analyst examines how this language, as it is connected to broader social and cultural contexts, influences ways of talking; and at the macro level the analyst examines the connection between language and ideology, uncovering how ideas become normative or not and deconstructing these normative assumptions. (Shaw and Bailey 2009)

[4] Femininity is characterised as communal or interpersonally oriented (Alcock et al. 2007, Zemore et al. 2000). Femininity, according to Alcock et al. (2007) and Zemore (2000), is also shaped by the persistence of the "marriage mandate" and the "motherhood mandate", as well as by the view of women as ambivalent about sexuality, capable enough to juggle different types of work inside and outside the home and susceptible to aggression. With specific reference to the Caribbean, of which Trinidad is a part, conceptions of femininity continue to be influenced by stereotypes and beliefs based on biology (Ellis 2003), but histories of slavery, indentureship and colonisation and the continued relevance of Euro-American cultural products influence and complicate perceptions of gender identity (Ellis 2003, Smith 2006, Baksh 2011, Niranjana 2011). Franco (2010) suggests that femininity is signaled by dominant notions of sexual responsibility, motherliness, virtuousness and containment as well as, from the perspective of women especially, by the notions of independence, freedom and self-actualisation. Hosein (2004), while focusing only on Indo-Trinidadian females, describes notions of femininity in similar terms. She concludes that femininity for such females is marked by the ideals of respectability and purity along with the notions of independence, responsibility and achievement (Hosein 2004).

[5] "The dumb blonde" is a stereotype which constructs an exclusive ethnic in-group. According to Kuhn and Radstone (1990) dumb blondes are white women with blonde hair who are characterised by "overt 'natural' sexuality (of which they may or may not be aware) with a profound ignorance and innocence manifest in an inability to understand even the most elementary facts of everyday life" (47).

[6] The details of talk upon which this study relied were made accessible through the use of Gail Jefferson's conventions for transcribing data. Her conventions reflect the standard that has emerged for transcription and accounts well for the nuances of spoken conversation (McIlvenny 2002). These transcription conventions are especially useful because as Jefferson (2004) explains they allow the researcher to prepare talk for analysis and theorising.

[7] Pseudonyms were created for all respondents to protect their anonymity.

[8] Repair in conversation analysis refers to a turn-taking or conversation management strategy where a speaker simply corrects something they have said or are in the course of saying, or a speaker or listener may use it as a mitigation strategy to attend to possible trouble in speaking, hearing or understanding, trouble being misarticulations, malapropisms, use of a wrong word, unavailability of a needed word, and difficulty hearing or being heard and understanding. (Kitzinger 2013, Drew et al. 2013).

[9] "Bitch" is impolite because it is often used to insult women and to convey strong feelings of hatred, anger, envy or contempt (Swan 1995). In some female peer groups it may be used positively to express affection or affilitation. However, its meaning is most often infused with negative connotations that have the effect of cursing the addressee.

[10] In Trinidad *fru fru* refers to excessively detailed decoration, e.g. in terms of dress, it refers to multiple colourful and outstanding accessories worn to enhance an outfit.

[11] *Horse* is a Trinidadian slang word used to refer to a close friend. From my exposure, it is a slang used more often by young male speakers to refer to close male friends in particular.

[12] According to Miller et al. (1998), "in everyday language, 'shopping' is usually restricted to the purchase of food and clothing, stereotypically regarded as women's work" (198).

[13] *Fella* is a Trinidad Creole word for fellow or man.

[14] In Trinidad this pout is a significant facial expression referred to as *cuya/cooyah mouth*. In my experience *cuya/cooyah mouth* is used to express a multitude of feelings, common among these are vexation, disagreement or dismissal. Winer (2009) describes it under the synonym *coupiya mouth* as "a disrespectful or impolite gesture made by pushing out the lower lip, sometimes both lips. Also to turn mouth to one side and partially open the mouth as if to speak, but hold the position without speaking" (253).

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