

[Go to old article view](#)

The Journal of Popular Culture

Volume 47, Issue 5

October 2014

Pages 937–951

Article

The Erotic-Chaste Dialectic and the New Southern Belle Code at the High School Prom: Feminine Gender Role Stress across Ethnic and Socio-Economic Factors

[Donnalyn Pompper](#), [Kathryn Crandall](#)

First published:

10 October 2014 [Full publication history](#)

DOI:

10.1111/jpcu.12180 [View/save citation](#)

Cited by:

0 articles [Check for new citations](#)

Enhanced Article Feedback

For decades the high school prom has served as a democratized debutante ball; a hyper-feminized ritual for girls' coming-of-age in the US. Using nonrandom survey and qualitative interview research methods, we examine prom ritual meaning among Southern private and public high school girls and their parents. Findings expand our understanding of feminine gender role stress (FGRS)—specifically effects of the erotic-chaste dialectic enveloped in the New Southern Belle Code (NSBC) with regard to prom experiences among African-American/black, Caucasian/white, and Latina ethnic identities and socio-economic status (SES) groups.

The current study addresses three gaps in scholarly attention to gender role phenomena—which,

when considered together, expose a significant opportunity to further develop our cultural understanding of adolescent girls and feminine gender role stress (FGRS) in the context of a popular culture ritual. First, the high school prom event too often is taken for granted. Second, fashion frequently is considered too trivial to take seriously. Third, study of the US South and its women's gendered experiences is limited. The centuries-old fashion debate over “concealment, disguise, denial, and calculated ambiguity” ([Davis 86](#)) endures with popular media fetishizing girls' bodies as at once innocent and erotic. By enjoining Davis' erotic-chaste dialectic concept with the New Southern Belle Code (NSBC) (Lynxwiler and Wilson), we position FGRS as a result of oppositional ideas about sexual desire and modesty. We invoke critiques from critical-cultural studies, feminism studies, and girlhood studies.

Girls experience unprecedented visibility in mainstream popular culture and are pressured to come to terms with ideological femininity by using their bodies. Personifying a proper Christian and southern belle image of femininity works to “tighten the reins on acceptable behaviors for women” ([Liston and Moore-Rahimi 225](#)). Moreover, critique of a “post-feminist masquerade” (McRobbie 70) exposes how the fashion-and-beauty complex ([Bartky](#)) reinforces Whiteness as a cultural dominant so that spaces are limited. African-American/black girls negotiate tension between respectability and deviance in lieu of hypersexualized, stereotypical body images ([Weekes](#)) and Latinas who celebrate a Quinceañera fifteenth birthday reproduce a sexist, consumerist system ([Alvarez](#)). Since the high school prom is a \$6 billion industry ([Sperling and Chmielewski](#)), the International Prom Association estimates that teens spend an average of \$900 per couple—with girls spending \$500 or more on just the dress ([Kaplan and Feitelberg](#)).

Prom and Other Rite-of-Passage Rituals for Girls

Ritual theory is used to situate the high school prom in its socio-cultural context; the setting for examining Southern girls' FGRS. [Bell](#) defines *ritual* as the enactment of fundamental beliefs or symbolic codes; a strategic process with practices differentiating it from everyday life. Short for *promenade*, the prom strategically enables high schools to instill middle-class values ([Best](#)) and to create a coming of age space where teens may be supervised. Prom also provides a forum for what McRobbie calls “rituals of enjoyable femininity” (3); clothing, makeup and other heavily-promoted consumer culture goods and services. Children transition to adulthood at high school and scrutiny of routines lends insight into gender role influences. While fashion magazines frame prom as romantic true love and a Cinderella fantasy, it also has become synonymous with underage drinking, car accidents, virginity loss, and teenage pregnancy; notorious clashes between authorities and youths that garner headlines and fuel feature film plots.

SES plays a key role in female rituals. Since the mid-1900s, debutante balls promote family lineage as marriage-eligible girls are presented to society. Among African-American/black upper-class girls, Jack and Jill chapters and other elite groups host invitation-only debutante cotillions. Overall, coming-out rituals' popularity diminishes as critics call them sexist and paternalistic, ethnic integration occurs, girls lose interest, and mothers join the paid workforce ([Graham](#)). Yet, the Quinceañera gains popularity—as upper-classes spend as much as \$25,000 on the 15th birthday party ([Colloff](#)), which also celebrates a rediscovered or recreated ethnic history and Catholic sacraments ([Davalos](#)). Some

Christians host purity balls (formal father–daughter dinner dances wherein girls take a ring and pledge abstinence from sex until marriage) and Jewish tradition includes bat-mitzvah to celebrate womanhood. Among working-classes, some African-American/black communities' church groups and YWCAs offer rite-of-passage programs to impart traditional African cultures ([Piert](#)) and some Latina/os consider Quinceañera a “talisman” against teen pregnancy, violent death, gangs, and substance abuse ([Stewart i](#)).

The Prom Dress and the Erotic-Chaste Dialectic

Integral to cultural significance of the prom for girls is acquiring a dress; a strut-worthy focal point distinct in structure, cut, and fabric. Clothing constitutes a visual *language* referencing who we are and wish to be taken as ([Lurie](#)); in essence, contributing to “making of a self-conscious individual image” ([Hollander xiv](#)). A fancy prom dress epitomizes hyper-femininity and enables girls to express alternate identities to usual school attire. Advertisers target girls with annual prom-themed women's fashion magazines, as well as *Your Prom* and *Teen Prom*.¹

Ideological at its core, fashion is a social practice and a system of signs ordered by a complex set of relations marking age, ethnicity, gender, and SES (McRobbie). Davis indicts Western cultures' and Judeo-Christian traditions' scorn for sexuality and certain body parts—and praise for chastity—as an unfair burden borne by women and aptly named the conflict *erotic-chaste dialectic*. Popular binary dualisms include: “madonna-whore, unadorned-glamorous, reticent-forward” (Davis 87). Similarly, [Laver's](#) *seduction principle* illustrates modesty as “a check on the impulse to self-aggrandizement” and fashion as “the exploitation of immodesty” (8, 97). [Barnard](#) suggests that modesty only makes sense “if the possibility of seduction exists” (190). Conceal-reveal preferences for dresses that bare backs but cover fronts, as well as skirts featuring thigh-high slits that hint at skin exposure when walking, are instances of tension-generating exchanges consistent with the erotic-chaste dialectic. Hence, the fashion industry's obsession with a woman's body for its sexuality provides a troubling, complex dilemma for adolescent girls—one that has not yet been investigated in terms of FGRS.

Emphasized Femininity and Feminine Gender Role Stress (FGRS)

We invoke Connell's *emphasized femininity* concept to explore complicity in accommodating men's desires—and to emphasize risks to adolescent girls. *Femininity* is “a set of ideas about appropriate womanly behavior and feelings that are generally based on cultural assumptions about female nature” ([McPherson 21](#))—and clothes and makeup are essential to being feminine. [Connell](#) suggests collusion between hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity wherein women conform to [gender](#) norms linked to home, bedroom, and motherhood. Selecting a dress and engaging in body work to prepare for prom night is consistent with [Berger's](#) axiom: “Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at” (47). Moreover, emphasized femininity is perpetuated when some lesbians and questioning girls use alternate models by hosting a separate prom to have fun with clothing choices ([Lamb and Brown](#)).

Socialization effects of emphasized femininity and the erotic-chaste dialectic pressure girls, warranting study of gender role stress or strain (GRS). Girlhood studies has opened a space for exploring such outcomes. *Girl* tends to be defined by norms that prioritize Caucasian/white, middle class identities and “pathologize and/or criminalize the majority outside this category of privilege” ([Harris xx](#)) as topics of pregnancy, drug abuse, school failure, poverty, or violence seem to dominate studies of girls of color (Lamb). Fashion/beauty magazines rely on thin, norm-setting Caucasian/white models ([McRobbie](#)), as girls of color experience “violence of racism on the female body” ([Fine and Macpherson 190](#)). US girls mature in a sexualized, media-saturated world where messages can foster depression, eating disorders, self-injury, and suicide ([Pipher](#)). Sharpening a focus on Southern adolescent girls, Liston and Moore-Rahimi posit a double standard of openly discussing high school boys' sexual desires but repressing sexuality for girls through conformity to Christian and southern belle images. Moreover, some African-American/black girls strive for impossible feminine beauty ideals of light skin and straightened hair—as critiqued in Southern “Beauty Walk” pageants' beauty standards ([Lalik and Oliver](#)).

GRS may be higher for girls than boys, given that their bodies are “subject to order, surveillance, and regulation” ([Gleeson and Frith 105](#)) in both home and school spheres where they learn to be “appropriately gendered... classed and raced” ([Harris 101](#)). Girls are presumed weak and vulnerable to sexual corruption ([Lesko](#)). Thus, high-achieving African-American/black girls feel pressured to de-ethnicize to achieve school success ([Fordham](#)). At home, parents/guardians perceive adolescence to be an especially difficult parenting phase and reluctantly bestow freedoms ([Kurz](#)). Some fathers exhibit enmity toward daughters' sexual maturation and dating ([Devlin](#)), while mothers offer support through talk and activities.

Southern Culture and the New Southern Belle Code (NSBC)

In 1938, Franklin D. Roosevelt called the South “the Nation's No. 1 economic problem” (cited in McPherson 2), and 1960s civil rights news coverage framed the region as “an embarrassment to the rest of the nation” ([Wallace 436](#)). Perhaps for these reasons, Southern culture has received limited scholarly attention in the social sciences and few have studied Southern women's histories that are shrouded in “myth and fancy” ([Hawks and Skemp xi](#)). Because gender roles are shaped by unique mixes of regional culture values, geographies, economic factors, and historical contexts, we posit that Southern culture is distinctive. *Southern-ness* is a subculture ([Tindall](#)) and an ethnic group ([Reed](#)). Legacies of today's Southern females include slavery, migrant labor, and sharecropping—yet, African-American/black women repudiating the “Lost Cause” forged identities steeped in pride ([Johnson 525](#)). Regarding SES, images of upper-class Caucasian/white girls at cotillions have obscured realities of Florida panhandle poverty ([Stringer and Thompson](#)). “Half-hidden miscegenation” and repression of Southern women ([Scott 199](#)) continued into the late twentieth century. The Southern female's family values are extraordinarily resilient ([Friedman](#)), as she clings to a 225-year-old myth of genteel lady who is devoted to God, family, home and possesses personality traits of self-control, selflessness, and long-suffering patience ([Kenkel and Shoffner](#)). Rural church

society where religious fervor, adherence to elders' values, and deep regard for kinship networks ([Dillman](#)) shapes “southern women's culture” (Friedman 6).

The Southern lady serves patriarchy by disciplining Caucasian/white women to stay on their pedestal. Femininity is essential to working-class Southern women, and they are more likely to think a woman's place is in the home while men run the country ([Hurlbert](#)). Like these antecedents of the Southern lady revered for her beauty, sensuality, and mastery of decency and good manners, an NSBC is status consciousness (to keep others in their place), holds rigid sexual mores differentiating genders (powerful men with women who act the coquette and dress to please), is modest (flirting without sluttiness), upholds Southern traditions (concern for real or imagined family heritage), engages in conspicuous consumption (shopping for leisure), and constantly attends to her appearance ([Lynxwiler and Wilson](#)).

Literature Summary and Research Questions

A set of central themes among this literature logically lead to our research questions: (a) the high school prom is a highly significant gender role development ritual for adolescent US girls, (b) selecting what to wear is an important symbolic code embedded in the prom ritual, (c) conforming to social norms such as the erotic-chaste dialectic may produce FGRS, and (d) Southern culture is distinct and an NSBC prescribes complex gender roles for its women.

RQ1: What meanings do Southern a) adolescent girls and their b) parents/guardians ascribe to the high school prom ritual?

RQ2: What symptoms of feminine gender role stress or strain (FGRS) might be experienced among Southern high school girls with regard to the high school prom?

RQ3: How do a) socio-economic status (SES) and b) ethnicity factors play out in a Southern high school girl's prom experience?

Method

Two research methods were used: nonrandom survey administered among North Florida high school girls and in-depth interviews with girls and their parents (individually and as a family dyad). No research participant's voice should be essentialized as representative. This study was not funded. Permissions were secured from our university's internal review board, North Florida county school superintendents, boards of education, principals, teachers, and parents. Research participants were 116 North Florida junior and senior high school girls (aged 16 to 18) attending one of six high schools in three North Florida counties (Gadsden, Jefferson, Leon), and 21 of their parents (mothers aged 33 to 56; fathers aged 44 to 59). Four high schools were public and two were private (one Catholic, one nonsecular). One public high school is a university-officiated “research” school with student

demographics representative of the state's population. Parents all reported growing up in the South, and there was an even distribution among those who self-identified as upper class, middle class, and working class.

Among girls, 54 described their ethnic identity as African American/black, 40 were Caucasian/white, 17 Hispanic/Latina, 4 of Mixed Ethnicity, and 1 Asian American. Among parents, five mothers (aged 39 to 56) and two fathers (aged 44 to 57) were African American/black; seven mothers (aged 43 to 53) and six fathers (aged 46 to 59) were Caucasian/white; and one mother (aged 33) was Latina. No Latino fathers or Asian American parents participated in the study. Pseudonyms are used.

In collecting data, first, a nonrandom survey was conducted, using a one-page, two-sided instrument distributed to girls via teachers of required classes. Closed-ended probes were: class standing (junior, senior), "Have you attended a prom before?" age, and ethnicity. Open-ended probes were: "What does prom mean to you and why?" "Describe your perfect prom." "Describe your perfect prom attire." "If you have been to prom before, what stands out most in your memory?" Featured at the bottom of the second page was a space for telephone number and a last question: "Would you and your parents/guardians be interested in being interviewed for a study about prom?" 116 questionnaires were completed among 66 high school junior and 45 senior girls. Instruments were completed by 89 public high school girls and 27 private high school girls. Not all responded to each demographic question.

Second, in-depth interviews were conducted. Of the fourteen instruments that featured "yes" and thirty-eight "maybe" responses with a contact telephone number on the last question, girls and their parents/guardians were recruited for in-depth interviews. Interviewed were North Florida high school girls (13; 9 public school, 4 private school), mothers (13), and fathers (8). Of the 13 family dyad in-depth interviews conducted, 6 included the girl, mother, and father—and 7 included the girl and mother. For interviews, the typical African-American/black girl was age 16.8, attended public school, and lived with her African-American/black mother, a 44.8-year-old single parent. The typical African-American/black father was age 52.3. The typical Caucasian/white girl was age 17.1 and attended public or private school. The typical Caucasian/white mother was age 49.1 and the typical Caucasian/white father was age 52.8. The Hispanic/Latina was age 17, attended public school and lived with her mother, 33, a single parent. Twenty-one parents completed a short questionnaire of demographic questions.

All interviews were conducted at the family home. Stimulus material images from editorial and advertising content of *Your Prom* magazine were shown to respondents to gauge perceptions of prom dress designs showing varying amounts of skin. Among the nine images—dress lengths of short (above knee), mid-length (at or below knee), and long (at ankle)—were three groups (categories not revealed to research participants): (a) "modest" (dress loose, high neckline, no visible cleavage, sleeves); (b) "moderate" (dress semi-form-fitted, mid-neckline, no or some visible cleavage, small sleeves or straps); (c) "extreme" (dress very form-fitted, low-cut neckline, visible cleavage, thin straps or no sleeves). About 26 hours of interviews were recorded, producing 321 transcript pages. Interviews lasted until no new information was obtained—with the goal of saturation necessary to obtain relevant information.

Data were analyzed via a hermeneutic, phenomenological theme analysis on transcript data ([Van Manen](#)). Units of analysis were voices of girls and parents. A data analysis team consisted of

the study's two coauthors, plus one other academic (African-American/black female), and one eighteen-year-old high school Latina (not a participant). First, all members scrutinized raw data by independently reading questionnaires and transcripts to get a sense of the data—underlining relevant points and making margin notes. Second, we held four data analysis meetings and used Van Manen's selective technique of pondering statements and phrases that seemed particularly revealing throughout questionnaires and transcripts. Our research questions served to navigate data readings, but not to the degree that larger patterns/themes became invisible. Third, inspired by

Glaser and Strauss' grounded theory approach to qualitative data, we independently transferred notes to index cards that were categorized in piles. Next, team members shared rationales for card piles, and then the team collectively organized them until vast amounts of data were consolidated down to an essence and all agreed that data were adequately organized for responding to research questions.

Results and Discussion

Analyses of open-ended probes on questionnaires and qualitative in-depth interview data involved scrutiny of ways Southern high school girls (RQ1a), and their parents (RQ1b), discursively construct the prom ritual, feminine gender role stress (FGRS) Southern high school girls may experience with regard to prom (RQ2), and how SES (RQ3a) and ethnicity (RQ3b) may play out. Four themes are: *Attire Selection, a Definitive Female Gender Role Ritual*; *Southern Identities*; *Anxieties*; and *Financing the Fantasy*.

Theme One: Attire Selection, a Definitive Female Gender Role Ritual

This theme directly responds to RQ1: “What meanings do Southern a) adolescent girls and their b) parents/guardians ascribe to the high school prom ritual?”—as well as RQ3b: “How do ethnicity factors play out in a Southern high school girl's prom experience?” Most girls who participated in this study's survey and interviews, as well as mothers interviewed, couched prom in terms of emphasized femininity with a focus on formal dress shopping with mothers, daughters, sisters, girlfriends, cousins, aunts, and grandmothers. Fathers opined that they support their daughter's participation in a coming-of-age tradition like prom, but play nonessential roles. Jason, an African-American/black public school girl's father, explained: “I think she told me she got the dress... But all of that is her mama's business, not mine.” Chris, Caucasian/white father of a public school girl, said: “Mom takes care of girl things.” Yet, fathers participate in prom processes with regard to attire modesty (see *Southern Identities* theme) and financial support (see *Financing the Fantasy* theme).

Across ethnic identities, prom attire is essential to looking good for having a good time. When asked to “describe your perfect prom attire,” girls provided extraordinary detail—from color and fabric choices, to degrees of skin exposed and bling (“marvelous diamonds,” “sequins and glittering stuff,” “rhinestones or beads”), to style/cut/length. Girls preferred a more-erotic-than-chaste, floor-length dress with a thigh-exposing slit, “fitted at the bust and waist,” spaghetti (or no) straps, V-cut or halter neckline, and a plunging “back out.” A Latina public school girl sketched such a dress on the questionnaire. Two anomalies among this pattern were public school girls—one of mixed ethnicity, who wrote: “What if I wanted to wear a tux or pants under a skirt?”

Female bonding is integral to attire selection. A Caucasian/white public school girl wrote: “My perfect prom would include shopping and hanging out with my three best friends all day doing girly stuff.” An African-American/black public school girl, Shakenya, told of emotionally supporting, shopping with, and attending prom with a girlfriend whose boyfriend recently had “passed away.” Having mother participate in shopping also means immediate feedback about attire modesty (see *Southern Identities* theme) and cost (see *Financing the Fantasy* theme).

While the *Attire Selection, a Definitive Female Gender Role Ritual* theme resonated across ethnic identities, smaller, ethnic-identity-specific patterns emerged. As compared to girls of other ethnic identities, African-American/black girls noted skin tone in attire selection and mentioned their prom date. For example, surveyed African-American/black girls wrote that dress color should complement their skin tone and noted that having the “perfect guy/boy” or “the boy of my dreams” would complete their “look.” Two equated the prom ritual with “like practice for getting married” and “the pre-version of my wedding!”—and Shirley, an African-American/black mother of a public school girl, did, too: “I started to cry when I saw her in that dress. I thought of her getting married.” When interviewed, Tyffany, a public school African-American/black girl, said she took her mother and boyfriend dress shopping: “[M]y mom thought he shouldn't see the prom dress until prom but we have new ways these days. He didn't even know we was going and... he was like, ‘What are we doing here? I'm not supposed to be seeing your prom dress.’ But after that, he enjoyed me trying on all the dresses for him. When he saw the gold dress, he dropped his jaw.” Among Latinas who participated in this study, only one had attended prom. Despite their lack of direct experience with the ritual, however, all Latinas clearly identified the prom dress as a vital component of graduation and senior class status. Public school attendee, Candida, equated prom with Quinceañera—again, focusing on her attire: “Prom is also like our coming out party.”

Regarding this study's first and third research questions, the *Attire Selection, a Definitive Female Gender Role Ritual* theme suggests that prom means emphasized femininity and female gender bonding—with fathers also perceiving attire selection to be a female-gender domain.

Theme Two: Southern Identities

This theme addresses two research questions—RQ1: “What meanings do Southern a) adolescent girls and their b) parents/guardians ascribe to the high school prom ritual?”—and RQ3: How do a) socio-economic status (SES) and b) ethnicity factors play out in a Southern high school girl's prom experience?” Both girls and parents spoke of features that underscore *Southern Identities* and five New Southern Belle Code (NSBC) components: (a) Status Consciousness/Conspicuous Consumption (SC/CC); (b) Rigid Sexual Mores Differentiating Genders (RSM DG); (c) Modesty (M); (d) Upheld Southern Traditions (UST); and (e) Constant Attention to Appearance (CATA) (Lynxwiler and Wilson).

NSBC components of Status Consciousness and Conspicuous Consumption (SC/CC) were collapsed due to overlapping similarities. Girls noted on questionnaires and during interviews a compulsion to secure an exclusive look to “make heads turn,” “make an entrance,” or “be memorable.” Five girls interviewed—all private schooled—described travel to exclusive Alabama and Georgia boutiques. Two public school girls referred to couture design, as when an African-American girl wrote: “My perfect prom would be to come with a celebrity and pull up in something nice with a Gucci dress” and a Latina wrote: “It's a night 2 shine and B remembered depending on who U wear.” SC/CC, by extension,

includes transportation. Many girls wrote on questionnaires and all those interviewed mentioned: "limo," "Navigator limo," "party bus," "Chrysler 3000," or "Hummer." On the other hand, some girls resisted prom's SC/CC qualities. A public school girl, mixed ethnicity, wrote: "Prom means girls my age have the perfect reason to be three times more shallow and vapid than usual. It is not only an excuse but a celebration of focusing solely on how people look externally."

The Rigid Sexual Mores Differentiating Genders (RSMDG) NSBC component encourages women to act the coquette. All girls interviewed talked about dressing to enhance their appeal and most survey participants did, too. A Latina public school girl wrote that she had voted for a Mardi Gras prom theme: "U know, so we could wear the little white masks that U can act shy behind." An African-American/black public school girl wrote: "[I want] to have the guys drooling over me begging for my hand to dance." Prompted by stimulus materials during interviews, Yvette, an African-American/black public school girl, criticized one image: "That girl's trying to say that she didn't even try... That's not very sexy."

The NSBC may authorize use of feminine wiles, yet the Modesty (M) component checks against *im* modesty. All girls and parents interviewed, as well as most girls surveyed, emphasized that they *not look* a certain way at prom: "slut," "whore," as if "working a street corner," "trashy," or "like a porn star." As described by an Asian-American public school girl, girls at prom should avoid "anything too showy." Across ethnic identities, girls said exposed body parts makes a girl immodest: "as long as it don't show the crack of my butt and not too much of my chee-chees," and "can't dress all flashy with my boobs hanging out or my butt out." Caucasian/white girls' descriptions of prom attire noted on questionnaires the conservative, Christian influences and private school dress codes. Ashley, a Caucasian/white Catholic school girl explained Modesty: "I'm Catholic, and modesty's a virtue... My home-schooled cousin buys dresses online and sews them modest by making sleeves out of the shawls. Or if something's low, she'll get big ones and bring them up." Molly, a Caucasian/white public school girl, pointed to her chest to illustrate immodesty: "No sequins in unflattering places; it's not the Southern belle way."

Interviewed parents said they would object to dresses that show too much skin. Diane, an African-American/black mother of a public school clearly wants her daughter to avoid playing into hypersexualized African-American/black female body image stereotypes: "Whatever my baby want, I am 100 percent behind her! As long as she ain't getting that hoochie momma stuff." Girls and parents interviewed preferred "moderate" designs that were "long" among stimulus materials. Fathers said during family interviews that they would have total veto rights with regard to prom attire. Carl, an African-American/black public school girl's father, referred to an image among stimulus materials and described what the dress communicated: "That she is looking for trouble. It isn't anything I would want *my* daughter wearing."

The NSBC component, Upheld Southern Traditions (UST), involves concern for real or imagined family heritage—such as the Southern "lady" and "gentleman" traditions. UST was expressed among many girls. A Caucasian/white private school girl wrote in her narrative: "The perfect prom would be if it was at a plantation and the theme was 'Gone With the Wind' or 'Old South.' I would get asked by the nicest, outgoing, gentleman of a boy who liked to dance but NOT grind." An African-American public school girl wrote: "My mother likes for me to be a lady, and not like 'Girls Gone Wild.'" Drinking, cursing, and smoking also were mentioned as particularly unladylike behaviors.

The last of the NSBC components, Constant Attention to Appearance (CATA), suggests that Southern

females compliment others in order to be complimented in return. Research participants referred not only to CATA on prom night, but what we call an *immortal gaze*—as ensured by excessive picture taking that dominated both girls' questionnaire narratives and interviews with girls and parents. Girls enjoy taking pictures and parents consider this a priority. A public school girl, mixed ethnicity, wrote: “[E]verybody will notice me, take pictures, and remember me.” More than any other ethnic identity group, Caucasian/white girls preferred group dating, perhaps to facilitate multiple photo sessions. A Caucasian/white public school girl wrote: “[L]ast year we had a big group. Everyone says how beautiful you look and take LOADS of pictures. It's the best night of your life.” Another Caucasian/white public school girl wrote: “Last year when I was on the dance floor looking, I could see by the way people looked at me that I looked extravagant.”

Regarding the first and third research questions, the *Southern Identities* theme illustrates the NSBC across ethnic identities and SES as integral to prom's meaning.

Theme Three: Anxieties

This theme provides an answer to RQ2: “What symptoms of feminine gender role stress or strain (FGRS) might be experienced among Southern high school girls with regard to prom?” Girls who participated in this study's survey and interviews addressed *Anxieties* topics that cluster into five subthemes: (a) Body Image, (b) Fear of Failure, (c) Violence and Drama, (d) Living Up To the Hype, and (e) Music Choices. Of note, Ryan, a Caucasian/white father of a private Catholic school girl, spoke of his own anxiety: “I think that there is a lot of pressures that kids have to deal with... troubling things that happen at proms; kids getting involved in drinking and perhaps even sexual activities.”

First, girls articulated anxieties about Body Image, particularly weight. For some, this means balancing a figure-hugging fit to accentuate curves against the possibility of torn seams. Tyriana, an African-American/black public school girl explained: “My perfect dress has to fit my curves, but I don't want to bust out of my dress and have everyone looking at me.” Such sentiments are consistent with the SC/CC NSBC component since wearing a damaged dress means garnering attention for the *wrong* reasons. Liz, a Caucasian/white private school girl, said she wants a dress “to make me look very skinny.” On the other hand, a public school Latina wrote: “I have trouble in size about dresses considering that I'm a size double zero.”

Second, girls also harbor Fear of Failure concerns that ranged from a “night that's too hot or cold,” to “wardrobe malfunctions,” to “teachers freaking out,” to “people being dissatisfied with the decorations.” A Caucasian/white private school girl even shared a *future* fear of “look[ing] back at my pictures four years ahead and be like, ‘Oh my gosh! I actually wore that?!’” Tyriana, an African-American/black public school girl feared her lack of dress-wearing experience: “I can't sit in a skirt because I am going to open my legs and all that will be out.”

Third, most troubling were anxieties about prom Violence and Drama. As compared to high school girls of other ethnic identities, several African-American/black girls who participated in this study shared concerns about: “no drama!” “for everyone to get along,” “a prom with no violents (sic),” “no catfights and no one getting hurt,” “no fighting, cursing, smoking,” and “[date] bringing me back home safely.”

Fourth, some girls worried about prom Living Up To the Hype. Nicole, a Caucasian/white private school girl summed up this sentiment: “Prom to me means a whole lot of excitement in our preparations, but a

letdown once you arrive.” More critically, some girls said: “I don't really think it as big of a deal as students and schools make it out to be,” and “It's just another event to me.” A Caucasian/white public school girl said she went only to “make others happy.”

Finally, girls linked ethnic identity and Music Choices to prom, sharing concerns about “lame music” and “bad DJs.” Public school Latinas told of anxieties about music: “I have never attended a dance with only English music”—and another described a “perfect” prom as: “It would have a DJ that plays Spanish music and no one complains.” An African-American/black public school girl was concerned about music diversity: “We need an even mixture of rock, rap, country and classical”—while a Caucasian/white public school girl complained that her school's last prom featured “just rap.”

Theme Four: Financing the Fantasy

This theme also provides responses to RQ1: What meanings do Southern a) adolescent girls and their b) parents/guardians ascribe to the high school prom ritual? and RQ3: “How does a) socio-economic status (SES) and b) ethnicity factors play out in a Southern high school girl's prom experience?” Whereas some girls used terms like “princess,” “Cinderella,” or “fairy tale,” others qualified prom in terms of expense; as mentioned by girls and parents.

Fantasy in terms of romance (and sex) were described by girls across ethnic groups and schools with comments such as: “If you're going with a date it should be special,” “The last song that was played I danced with my best friend who was leaving for the Army,” and “I want to have my first slow dance with my sweetheart.” Some compared prom to royalty, as explained by a Caucasian/white private school girl: “I was leaving the restaurant and a little girl saw me in my dress and yelled ‘Mommy, look at the princess!’” Prom also was likened to celebrity culture: “the red carpet” and “Hollywood.” A public school's German exchange student said prom is “like in the movies.” Regarding sex fantasies, a public school Latina wrote: “In movies it is portrayed as the time when everyone loses their virginity.” An African-American/black public school girl wrote: “Prom means your parents trust you enough to allow you to go out with your boyfriend.” Other allusions to sex were: “... dress that would permit easy access” and “dress that's easy to get out of in a hurry.” A Caucasian/white public girl wrote: “Depending on your sexual experience, then it could be very meaningful.”

Footing the fantasy's bill can be a sticking point for girls and parents—as this theme's two subcategories illustrate: (a) Purse Strings and Power, and (b) Maintaining a Budget. Unquestionably, *who pays* brings to bear on girls' prom experiences—with parents using purse strings to wield power in vetoing immodest or cost-prohibitive attire choices. Megan, a Caucasian/white mother of a public school girl referred to an image that showed generous amounts of skin: “That would be on the burn pile out back... I'd pay her back for what she spent. That'd be my *compromise*.” Joseph, a Caucasian/white father of a Catholic schoolgirl scoffed at one of the stimulus images: “There would have to be alternatives because I'm not going to pay for *that*.” Some girls buy their own dresses—but some parents use a Maintaining a Budget teaching model. Paula, a Caucasian/white mother of a private school girl, explained: “[Y]ou just can't go in and buy whichever one you want... There is a budget.” Latina single-parent, Lisa, told of balancing her three children's needs against sharing her daughter's prom attendance enthusiasm: “[I]f they want something, if we can afford it with my budget, we get it... [W]e're saving up for the prom dress... [I]t's going to be her first time wearing a dress, so we're excited.” Diane, African-American/black mother of a public school girl said: “I'm the one paying

the bills here... I'm still going to help her when it comes down to it." Regarding this study's first and third research questions, the *Financing the Fantasy* theme suggests that prom in the South is about balancing fantasy with fiscal realities.

Conclusions

Rituals create and sustain social identity, exposing norms and ideals upon which people base their lives. This study was designed to expand understanding of the prom ritual in a specific US Southern region. Anecdotal evidence of a particular brand of feminine gender role stress (FGRS) experienced by Southern high school girls emerged, as impacted by the erotic-chaste dialectic enveloped in the New Southern Belle Code (NSBC). While all girls are targeted by the fashion-and-beauty complex, parental controls, and school authority, Southern girls endure the added pressure of NSBC conformity—practices rooted in attempts to live up to a “fictional creation of a bygone era” (

Boles and Atkinson 135).

Fashion is a language of mixed messages since girls simultaneously are told to cover their flesh, but to hypersexualize their bodies in order to attract attention. FGRS and *Anxieties* reported by Southern high school girls as they pursue an idealized feminine image constitutes a significant contribution to popular culture research. Findings also contribute to the under-researched feminine GRS/GRC phenomenon since Southern girls are uniquely challenged to negotiate the erotic-chaste dialectic with its conceal-reveal fashion dynamics integrated with the NSBC. Notions of Southern females as childlike, sexual objects persist; an injurious dynamic since girls lack control over their own bodies and can experience conflict with parents, school, and church. Findings indict the NSBC for influencing negative body image and socializing girls for Modesty endorsed by institutionalized patriarchy.

While we applaud girls' empowerment across ethnicity and SES lines—which helps to ease a Southern history of “racial” divide evidenced in a “white-” coded ritual—we conclude that such gains are offset by degrees of FGRS and *Anxieties* experienced in conforming to the NSBC. Although Best found no meaningful race and class distinctions in her Northeast-based prom study, our Southern study did.

Latinas associate prom with senior class status and graduation, perhaps because a high school diploma is yet an anomaly in Southern Latin households. Girls are desperate for acceptance in a world where their success is gauged by pleasing males, a claim that may be particularly salient amidst heterosexual African-American/black Southern girls who consider prom a “pre-wedding.”

Caucasian/white girls so emphasized picture taking, that we must conclude an *immortal gaze* is essential to enjoyment. Moreover, prom produces a disciplined body for consumption. Not only is a Southern girl's body consumed by others' eyes, but she herself consumes a wide array of products and services in the pursuit of immortality. As Quinceañera critics' condemn exorbitant spending, working-class parents stress over finding a way to make ends meet so that daughters can look their best and travel in style. We only can wonder what household necessities parents neglect when *Financing the Fantasy* .

Albeit in the very small minority, some Southern girls openly criticized the prom ritual. In considering what differentiates a girl who rejects prom's cultural meaning and/or the NSBC, our findings suggest that she disapproves of the hype, fantasy, and conformity to tradition—in terms of gender roles,

succumbing to vanity and consumerist tendencies associated with spending large sums, and reacting to pressures by parents, school dress codes, and religious teachings. Of particular concern is commentary that girls feel forced to attend prom “only to make others happy.” Future opportunities to use these findings and to continue building theory around FGERS include further probing resistance—especially among young people who participate in gay proms, or avoid prom attendance at all. Moreover, we encourage collection of data around the US for comparative purposes—and including upper-class African-American/black and Latina/o research participants for additional perspectives.

Note

- 1 Both produced by Fairchild Bridal Group which also produces *Brides* , *Modern Bride* , and *Elegant Bride* .

Biographies

Donnalyn Pompper, PhD, is a tenured associate professor and member of the doctoral faculty at Temple University's School of Media & Communication. Her teaching and research focus on social identity intersectionalities in organizations and in mass media representations. She is the author of the book, *Practical and Theoretical Implications of Successfully Doing Difference in Organizations* published by Emerald Publishing (2014), and the forthcoming book, *Corporate Social Responsibility and Public Relations: Negotiating Multiple Complex Challenges* published by Routledge (2015). She is the coeditor of *Representing Resistance: Media, Civil Disobedience & the Global Justice Movement* published by Praeger with Andy Opel. Pompper also is author or coauthor of 41 journal articles and book chapters and has presented 62 academic papers at international and national conferences. She is winner of seven top conference papers in 11 years, in addition to the PRIDE Award from the National Communication Association's Public Relations Division in 2005 and 2012.

Kathryn Crandall earned her BS in Public Relations, M.L.I.S. and J.D. from Florida State University. She currently works for the Florida State College of Law Research Center and coteaches International Legal Research.

Works Cited

Wiley Online Library

[Help](#) [Browse by Subject](#) [Browse Publications](#) [Resources](#)

[Agents](#) | [Advertisers](#) | [Cookies](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [About Us](#)

[Privacy](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Terms & Conditions](#) | [Media](#)

WILEY

[Wiley.com](#) [About Wiley](#) [Wiley Job Network](#)

Copyright © 1999-2015 John Wiley & Sons, Inc. All Rights Reserved