

THE EFFECTS OF FASHION TRENDS ON THE PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL UNIFORMS

by

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While the effects of school uniforms have been studied, a gap exists within the literature, which includes the effects of fashion trends inspired by schoolgirl uniforms. The purpose of this ethnographic pilot study was to fill the gap within the literature on the practice and transgressive use of female school uniforms and to determine the need for a larger study, while researching if schoolgirl-inspired fashion trends influence the perspectives of women who wore school uniforms as children. Eight participants were interviewed one on one about their experiences and their perceptions of school uniforms and the fashion trends they inspire. All of the participants were women between the ages of 18 and 39 and wore school uniforms in elementary, middle, and/or high school. The data shows that half of the participants acknowledged the existence of sexual connotations associated with schoolgirl-inspired trends. However, the majority of the women stated that the trends and their connotations do not impact their perception of either the uniform's meaning or purpose. In conclusion schoolgirl-inspired trends appear to have minimal impact on the perceptions of women who wore the uniform, however other effects may exist. Further research in the form of a larger study is needed to further explore these implications.

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## **The Schoolgirl Uniform as Fashion**

Despite the predominant purpose of uniforms to convey regulation, unity, and discipline, uniforms often simultaneously embody sexual, erotic, and fetishized connotations. These connotations visually manifest within the replication of uniforms in pornography, subcultures, and various media outlets, such as film, television, and the imagery of popular music (Craik, 2005). In the 1970s, fetish images began to trickle into popular culture. During this time, the fashion industry similarly adopted fetish clothing, including sexualized uniforms, such as Thierry Mugler's use of equestrienne and military uniforms (Steele, 1996; Steele, 2010). Once an image of a fetishized uniform infiltrates a culture, the group associated with the uniform may never recover its original credibility or status (Craik, 2005). The abolition of the female nurse's uniform which preceded today's scrubs exhibits how a profession altered its uniform practices in response to the sexualization of its image. In this case, the original purpose of the uniform to promote a professional image was threatened by the "naughty nurse" figure which over time came to correlate with the uniform (Hardy & Corones, 2017, p. 547).

Though represented differently, uniforms associated with both positions of servility and authority are fetishized, such as a maid or police officer's uniform (Craik, 2005). Additionally, the fetishization of uniforms incorporates both those of males and females (Joseph, 1986). However, women's uniforms are particularly fetishized. While the image of a man in uniform often evokes traits accordant with masculinity, the image of a woman in uniform incites "highly charged concepts of gender, sexuality, and sensuality. Their very appearance in uniform is imbued with sexual frisson and erotic possibilities" (Craik, 2005, p. 99). The sexual representation of women in uniform not only includes adult women but children, often schoolgirls.

The representation of women's uniforms within fashion and film during the 1920s favored the sailor suit (Craik, 2005). Modeled after European naval uniforms, the suit is characterized by a sailor collar (McVeigh, 2010). Most often worn by children or as a school uniform, the sailor suit evoked "sexual innocence" and would later serve as a fetish costume (Craik, 2005, p. 90). As Glenn O'Brien, coauthor of *Katlick School* states, "there is something powerfully erotic about Catholic schoolgirl uniforms...it's a charming fetish" (as cited in Durham, 2008, p. 114). Similar to this idea, in Japan images of schoolgirls appear throughout society as sex symbols (Hamm, 2012). Erotic depictions of schoolgirls in uniform commonly appear within graphic novels, anime, and film (Kinsella, 2002). Furthermore, the schoolgirl uniform is the most sexualized of all the Japanese culture's uniforms (Craik, 2005).

Just as the bondage fetish evolved into the fashion trends of the 1970s, so too has the sexualized image of schoolgirls (Craik, 2015; Steele, 2010). Schoolgirl uniforms made their way from pornographic images and fashion subcultures to popular culture predominately via popular music icons. The Slits, Madonna, Britney Spears, and Tatu which was a Russian pop duo from the early 2000s, all popularized and continue to popularize the sexy schoolgirl trend (Craik, 2015; Lynch, 2014). Today, whether modified and worn as casual wear on the streets of Japan or adapted into punk regalia schoolgirl uniforms simultaneously exist as their intended function, as fetish costume, and a fashion trend (McVeigh, 2012; Steele, 2010).

### **Statement of the Problem**

While the effects of school uniforms have been studied, a gap exists within the literature, including the effects of fashion trends inspired by schoolgirl uniforms on women who wore school uniforms. Within subcultures, popular culture, and societies around the world, the schoolgirl uniform is a prominent image (Craik, 2005). As early as the late 1800s, sex workers

began dressing in fetishized costumes, including that of school uniforms (Steele, 1996). In the mid 1970s school uniforms were one of many uniforms adopted by the music industry as fashion (Craik, 2005). In Japan, the schoolgirl uniform is not only “cute” but a “symbol of rebellion and sexuality” (Steele, 2010). Despite the documented history of schoolgirl uniforms and the clothing and images they inspire, little is still understood about their influence on the women who wore the uniform as children.

Images of schoolgirl uniforms have been associated with the sex industry for centuries. These images commonly appear within pornography (Craik, 2005). In this way, sexual adult images coexist with images of childhood, creating a culture that portrays schoolgirls as sex symbols and as potential sexual partners (Durham, 2008). Furthermore, pornographic images and stories create fantasies that may become part of the viewer’s sexual identity (Page, 2009). These images of school uniforms, while inspiring pornographic and fetish costumes, later inspired the clothing of subculture groups like punks (Craik, 2005). As a subculture adopts mainstream followers, its clothing is often depicted within popular music and fashion trends (Craik, 2005). Designers such as Vivienne Westwood, Thierry Mugler, and Mary Quant have all incorporated fetish images within their designs (Steel, 2010). For decades this type of sexualized clothing has contributed to both the fashion industry and popular culture references (Steele, 2010).

Sexualized images of women in pornography often resemble those of mainstream media, such as the common portrayal of women as “young, thin, toned, hairless, and...with a come-hither look” (Page, 2009, p. 110). The clothing referenced within mainstream media also resembles the clothing of pornography, such as the sexualized school uniform. While many female musicians have worn versions of schoolgirl-inspired clothing, references to Britney

Spears' 1998 version can be found throughout the literature on the topic of sexualized fashion. Anne Lynch (2014) explains Spears' debut in her article on the mainstreaming of sexualized fashion. "She skyrocketed to popularity at the age of sixteen as a self-proclaimed virgin, dressed to flaunt in sexy Catholic schoolgirl fashions" (Lynch, 2014). Musicians like Spears were and are incredibly influential not only to the listeners within their age group, but of older men and young girls, contributing to the media's increasingly young standard of female sexuality (Durham, 2008). Additionally, the sexualized use of schoolgirl uniforms within popular culture creates a "secret life" for school uniforms, a life with "perverse potentialities" (Craik, 2005, p. 77).

While the sexualization of school uniforms is prevalent within Western societies, in Japan schoolgirl uniforms are similarly associated with maturity and sexuality as opposed to representing adolescence or asexuality. For some, the idea that a schoolgirl is sexy despite the uniform has shifted to a schoolgirl is sexy because of the uniform (McVeigh, 2000). Schoolgirl uniforms have become so sexualized that young Japanese women often wear versions of the uniform as casual clothing (McVeigh, 2012).

However, this is not a new phenomena, in the late 1990s, images of schoolgirl uniforms populated both pornographic and popular fashion magazines. "The gap between the older male image of the schoolgirl as a sex object, and the schoolgirls' own subjective image of themselves, had begun to close" (Kinsella, 2002, pp. 231-232). Despite this and other sexual representations of school uniforms in pornography, subcultures, and popular culture, school uniforms have changed very little, so that many aspects of early school uniforms can still be found in uniforms today (Craik, 2005).

While literature exists on the sexualization of schoolgirl uniforms, little of it documents the perceptions of women who wore schoolgirl uniforms. Furthermore, a gap remains within the

documentation of the effects of fashion trends inspired by the uniform, suggesting the need for this study and for additional documentation on the effects of the representation of school uniforms within subcultures, popular culture, and societies around the world.

### **Background and Need**

Fashion trends often evolve by way of the trickle-up effect. Blumer's trickle-up or bubble-up theory places consumers at the inception of a fashion trend, rather than fashion designers or the fashion elite. The subcultures of Japan illustrate this theory, in which it is apparent that certain fashion trends came from the streets, not celebrities or fashion retailers (Kawamura, 2012). In the case of schoolgirl-inspired clothing, the trend first emerged from the "sexual underground" when it was adopted by subculture groups like punks in the 1970s and Japanese Kogal girls in the 1990s (Kinsella, 2002; Steele, 2010, pp. 332-333). The trend also appeared within popular culture, worn most often by musicians. Popular music culture has been associated with the reinterpretation of uniforms for decades, such as the costumes worn by artists like The Village People and The Beatles (Craik, 2005). Designers like Vivienne Westwood have since appropriated the trend from fetish, subculture, and popular culture fashions (Steele, 2010). While schoolgirl-inspired trends may have first trickled-up, they appear to have also trickled-down. The trickle-down theory refers to the process in which "lower class individuals" imitate the fashions worn by the elite (Kaiser, 2010, pp. 689-690). Given the rise of schoolgirl-inspired fashion trends, often sexualized interpretations of schoolgirl uniforms exist within subcultures, popular culture, and society.

Though many have researched the history of fetishism on the fashion industry and the clothing of subcultures, gaps within the literature still exist. Schoolgirl uniforms commonly appear within fetish and pornographic imagery (Craik, 2005). However, while fashion

researchers often study fetish clothing, they less frequently study the costumes of pornography. The clothing sold in Vivienne Westwood's London shop, including "bondage trousers, rubber stockings, corsets, and extreme shoes," is a well documented example of the mainstreaming of fetish fashion (Steele, 2010, pp. 332-333). Yet, the rise in popularity and the effects of trends inspired by schoolgirl uniforms borrowed from both pornographic and fetish imagery needs further documentation.

Much of the literature on fetish clothing currently omits the effects of fetish fashion trends, even when exhibited within popular culture, including the trends inspired by schoolgirl uniforms. For decades, female musicians have interpreted schoolgirl uniforms sexually (Lynch, 2014). While the sexual interpretation of schoolgirl uniforms by fetishists and subculture groups remains, at least partially underground, the sexual representation of schoolgirl uniforms by popular musicians promotes the image amongst a mainstream audience, encompassing all age groups (Durham, 2008). The effects of this widespread popularization of schoolgirl-inspired trends and the connotations they acquire from fetish imagery lacks documentation, in regard particularly to the women who have worn the actual uniform.

In Japan, a culture that heavily relies on the practice and transgressive use of uniforms, the uniform most fetishized is that of the schoolgirl (Craik, 2005). While many societal perceptions of schoolgirl uniforms lack documentation, a fair amount exists on the Japanese view of schoolgirl-inspired trends, images, and actual school uniforms. Yet, the effects of the connotations associated with schoolgirl-inspired trends in Japanese or other societies have yet to be documented.

The research and documentation of the perceptions of women who wore school uniforms as children could begin to fill this gap in the literature. An ethnographic study tracing the

personal histories of these women would record the effects, if any, of schoolgirl inspired trends on the women's perception of school uniforms and the practice of uniforming girls in school. Furthermore, this research may not only uncover the women's perception of school uniforms but if and how schoolgirl-inspired fashion trends affected their perceptions of themselves.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this pilot study is to fill the gap within the literature on the practice and transgressive use of uniforms and to determine the need for a larger study, while researching if schoolgirl-inspired fashion trends influence the perspectives of women who wore school uniforms as children. When school uniforms are appropriated within fetish clothing or the attire of subculture groups, sexual and other transgressive connotations may be attributed to both schoolgirl-inspired trends or the uniforms themselves. Popular music culture, film, television, and other media further popularizes these connotations through the use of these trends within popular culture (Craik, 2005). Yet, little documentation exists on the effects of these fashion trends and their connotations on the women who wore uniforms in school. To document the perceptions of these women and to determine the need for a larger study, I conducted interviews with eight women who wore school uniforms as children. The participants were between the ages of 18 and 35 and currently live in south and central Texas. The women either attended elementary, middle, or high schools which required a uniform and included charter, Lutheran, and Catholic schools in the United States and Mexico. The interviews lasted approximately 20 minutes each and covered the descriptions of the uniforms the participants wore, how the uniforms related to schoolgirl-inspired trends, and the participant's feelings toward the practice of school uniforms. I hoped that these interviews might benefit the participants through the opportunity to share their stories and to make an impact on the future of this research. With this

pilot study I intended not only to establish the need for a larger study but to contribute to the literature on pedagogy, feminist theory, and symbolic dress and trends. I began by asking a series of questions.

### **Research Questions**

With this pilot study, I intend to answer the three following questions:

- From the perspective of women who wore school uniforms as children, does the sexualization of school uniforms by schoolgirl-inspired trends influence their perceptions of school uniforms?
- Does the sexualization of the school uniform by schoolgirl-inspired trends influence their perceptions of themselves as former schoolgirls?
- Do the results of this study suggest the need for a larger study?

### **Significance to the Field**

The results of this study have the potential to contribute to the literature of several fields. In addition to documenting the history of this subject, this study has the propensity to benefit the research of pedagogy, feminist theory, and symbolic dress and trends. This study and the testimonies of former students may fill a gap within the historical documentation of female school uniforms, how they relate to fashion trends, and the impact on former students. Researchers of childhood education may apply the findings of this study to the analysis of school uniforms, their benefits or disadvantages, school uniform practices, and the future use of uniforms in school. Feminist theorists may find a relationship between the tradition of school uniforms, fashion trends inspired by school uniforms, and the experiences of female students to the study of gender equality. Furthermore, research of school uniforms and the fashion trends they inspire would directly contribute to the study of dress, trends, and symbolic clothing.



## Definitions

The definitions below define several concepts and phrases used throughout my research. I have chosen to include terms that are either specific to fashion studies or that I believe need clarification or explanations in this context.

- Casual Wear – informal clothing associated with leisure (Parson, 2010).
- Costume – clothing particular to an occasion, season, or group of people (Cumming, Cunningham, C., & Cunningham, P., 2010).
- Fetish Clothing – clothing associated with or worn by fetishists (Steele, 2010).
- Kogal – a style of clothing, accessories, hair and makeup from the 1990s inspired by female Japanese school uniforms (Kinsella, 2002).
- Trickle-Down – the process in which a fashion trend originates in the upper class and is replicated by the lower classes (Kaiser, 2010).
- Trickle-Up – the process in which a fashion trend originates in the lower class and is replicated by the upper class (Kaiser, 2010).

## Limitations

This pilot study was completed during the final two semesters of my Master's level graduate degree. Given this time constraint, I limited my search of participants to individuals I knew personally or through mutual contacts. This convenience sampling resulted in an uneven representation of participant demographics, potentially resulting in outliers. While the majority of women interviewed attended middle or high schools in Texas, one was from Michigan and another from Mexico. In addition, given the varying ages of the women, several of the older participants expressed during the interview that they could not recall certain experiences from

their time in elementary, middle, or high school. These limitations and others that became apparent after the completion of this study are further discussed in chapter five.

## **Conclusion**

While the purpose of school uniforms may be to create a sense of unity or discipline for students, many societies associate ambiguous or sexualized connotations with the uniform. Schoolgirl-inspired trends perpetuate these connotations as they often resemble the sexualized depictions of the uniform within the media (Craik, 2005). The effects of these trends on the women who wore these uniforms have not been thoroughly documented. The purpose of this study is to fill this gap in the literature and to justify further research in the form of a larger study. This study has the potential to not only explore the history of this subject but to contribute to the literature on pedagogy, feminist theory, and symbolic dress and trends.

## **Literature Review**

Throughout many societies, particularly western cultures, uniforms embody conflicting connotations, both of conformity and sexual frisson, discipline and fetish. While the sexualization of uniforms includes male and female uniforms, women's uniforms are especially fetishized. The fetishization of female uniforms involves both adult women and children, such as the sexualization of schoolgirl uniforms. Images of schoolgirls and schoolgirl uniforms have appeared in pornography and within the sex industry for centuries. The uniform has since inspired fetish costume, the clothing of subcultures, and mainstream fashion trends (Craik, 2005). While literature exists on the history, sexualization, and effects of school uniforms a gap exists in the documentation of the effects of schoolgirl-inspired fashion trends on women who wore the uniform as children.

The literature review will address three areas related to schoolgirl uniforms, including the origins and purpose of the uniform, the sexualization of the uniform within popular culture, and the effects of the uniform on students. The first section will discuss the history and the intentions of school uniforms. The second section will address research related to the portrayal of schoolgirl uniforms within mainstream media and popular culture. Finally, the third section will focus on the impact of school uniforms on students.

### **Origins and Purpose of the School Uniforms**

School uniforms appear to have originated in Europe with the intention of shaping boys into disciplined adults (Craik, 2005). The following articles and studies expound on this history and the intent of school uniforms. As referenced previously, Jennifer Craik's (2005) book *Uniforms Exposed* examines the history of school uniforms in addition to their role in popular culture and their impact on students. Researchers Muhsin Hesapcioglu and Filiz Meseci Giorgetti (2009) identify the source of the uniform in their study, *The Origin of Black Smock and White Collar*. This collection of historical data documents the origins of school uniforms, and it also analyzes the intended purpose of the uniform so that it may be compared with the testimonies derived from this study.

In chapter three of *Uniforms Exposed*, Craik (2005) discusses the origin of the school uniform style that students all over the world still wear today. Furthermore, Craik (2005) explores the differences associated with female and male school uniforms. Early school uniforms were inspired by military uniforms and ecclesiastic dress. However, today many identifiable aspects of school uniforms depict militarist attributes, such as single breasted jackets, ties, oxford shirts, V-neck sweaters, tall socks and lace-up shoes. These uniforms play a role in the masculinity training of the boys that wear them, teaching the wearer a set of norms that prepare

them for adulthood. Female school uniforms similarly train the wearer. However, in the past, former student testimonies have shown that the uniforms for both genders could convey masculine traits, dressing male students in a similar uniform to that of adult men and dressing female students in one that differs from the clothing of female adults. This contributes to the literature on the history of the ambiguous nature of female uniforms, particularly schoolgirl uniforms.

Hesapcioglu and Meseci Giorgetti (2009) research of school uniforms focuses on one example of early school uniforms, first worn in England and identifiable by the black smock and white collar. Their qualitative research found that the roots of this uniform come from religious dress. However, similar to Craik's (2005) literature, the purpose of the uniform correlates with that of militaristic school uniforms. Hesapcioglu and Meseci Giorgetti state that the uniform's intention was to "create obedient and loyal bodies with a strong sense of belonging to their nation" (Hesapcioglu & Meseci Giorgetti, 2009, p. 1746). Studies show that today, the uniform contributes to this. In addition the researchers identified a second purpose of the uniform, to mask socio economic inequalities amongst students. However, studies found that school uniforms unsuccessfully do so and in some instances result in the opposite by identifying the wearer as from a particular class (Hesapcioglu & Meseci Giorgetti, 2009). This qualitative study documents both the origin and purpose of school uniforms.

The history and origins of school uniforms documented within this literature depict the intended purpose of early school uniforms, which still pertain to many of today's school uniforms. In comparison to the ambiguous and often sexualized depictions of schoolgirl uniforms, the intended purpose of the uniform differs greatly from its connotations. The origin and spread of these connotations are further discussed in the next section.

## Sexualization of Schoolgirl Uniforms

Mainstream media contributes to the popularization and commoditization of sexualized clothing associated with young girls, including schoolgirl uniforms (Durham, 2008). M.Gigi Durham (2008) discusses this concept in her book *The Lolita Effect*. In addition, the literature that follows contributes to the dialogue on the sexualization of schoolgirl uniforms within popular culture. Annette Lynch (2010) investigates the manifestation of sexualized women's wear in her article *Porn Chic*. Sharon Kinsella (2002) researches the phenomena in regard to Japanese schoolgirl uniforms in her article, *What's Behind the Fetishism of Japanese School Uniforms?* This literature establishes the emergence and the existence of the sexualized depictions of schoolgirl uniforms within popular culture referred to throughout this study.

Durham (2008) discusses the media's sexualization of young girls in her book *The Lolita Effect*. In chapter four, Durham (2008) describes Brittany Spears' famous 1998 photo shoot in which she wore schoolgirl-inspired clothing. Not only was Spears underage at the time, she was also depicted as a highly sexualized young girl. The school uniform further helped to convey her age. Durham (2008) suggests that this fetishized portrayal of an innocent schoolgirl played a significant role in Spears' rise in popularity (Durham, 2008). As in this example, this chapter asserts that the media is significantly influential in popularizing sexualized young girls and the clothing most associated with them.

Durham (2008) explains that when popular culture mimics fetish imagery all ages are exposed to adult themes, particularly when children are placed in the roles of sex symbols. Additionally, popular culture's impact on the retail industry translates these images into mainstream fashion trends both for adult and underage consumption (Durham, 2008). In chapter

four Durham (2008) further documents the role of the media and popular culture in the tickle up of schoolgirl trends.

In her article entitled *Porn Chic* Lynch (2010) documents the rise of sexual clothing in popular culture. Like Craik (2005) and Durham (2008), Lynch (2010) references popular music's role in the translation of uniforms and fetish clothing into mainstream fashion trends. She also describes the 1998 Brittany Spears schoolgirl photo shoot, likening it to playboy and to child pornography. However, despite the problems associated with the sexualization of women through clothing and the media, Lynch (2010) suggests that for many women their choice to dress provocatively empowers them as females, that it challenges the mentality of a good girl (Lynch, 2010). This article contributes to Steele's (1996) idea that not all women can be characterized as victims of sexual imagery or of fetishized clothing (Lynch, 2010). When attributed to women who wore school uniforms as children, the idea that the choice to wear sexualized clothing for the purpose of empowering oneself needs further research as it involves underage women.

Kinsella's (2002) article *What's Behind the Fetishism of Japanese School Uniforms?* explains the history of the sexualization of schoolgirl uniforms in Japanese society. Kinsella (2002) traces the popularity of schoolgirl imagery back to the 1950s. During this time the media portrayed schoolgirls wholesomely. However, transgressive representations such as pornographic novels were also popular. These pornographic images quickly developed into "extreme images of schoolgirls being seduced or raped by monsters, schoolmasters, or elderly relatives" in the 1960s and 1970s (Kinsella, 2002, p. 221). Additionally, school children began to appear both as sexual victims and as violent or sadistic characters within popular anime, manga, television, and film. The popularization of these images eventually lead to the adoption of school uniforms as

fashion by subcultures. While this article leaves out the embrace of schoolgirl uniforms by mainstream fashion trends, it does explain popular culture's appropriation of these subculture trends (Kinsella, 2002). Kinsella's (2002) description of the trickle up effect in Japan may help to understand how schoolgirl uniforms trickle up throughout cultures around the world.

Durham (2008), Lynch (2010), and Kinsella (2002) discuss the history of the sexualization of schoolgirl uniforms. Their research describes the spread of the connotations associated with both the depictions of schoolgirl uniforms and the trends inspired by them. In the following section, I explore the impact of the uniforms themselves.

### **Effects of School Uniforms on Students**

While the effects of schoolgirl-inspired trends have not been thoroughly documented, literature exists on the effects of school uniforms themselves. The studies below report these effects. In regard to the effects of school uniforms on female students, Alison Happel (2013) investigates issues that specifically pertain to schoolgirls in her study entitled *Ritualized Girling*. Furthermore, Brian J. McVeigh's (2000) research focuses on Japanese student perceptions of school uniforms. These studies show, to some extent, the effects of school uniforms and may suggest that similar or comparable effects derive from schoolgirl-inspired trends.

Happel's (2013) article *Ritualized girling: school uniforms and the compulsory performance of gender* suggests that skirts, which male students are not required to wear, control the wearer. Skirts may expose the student's underwear, buttocks, or genitals, requiring the female student to perform differently than male students or female students who have the option to wear pants. Sitting, standing, walking, and playing must all be executed in a way that monitors the wearer's modesty (Happel, 2013). This type of "gender performance" may contribute to the sexualization of schoolgirl uniforms. While uniforms are fetishized for the very reason that the

wearer is forced to wear it, a schoolgirl uniform is both enforced and susceptible to the indecent exposure of its wearer (Happel, 2013).

McVeigh (2000 & 2012) has researched the effects of both schoolgirl uniforms and schoolgirl inspired trends. He states that in Japan schoolgirl uniforms are considered cute and are desired by the students as well as adults who view them and those that wear stylized versions of them as fashion. He explains that the idea of cuteness plays a strong role in Japanese culture, particularly consumer or retail culture. The interpretation of schoolgirl uniforms as subculture and as mainstream fashion contributes to identifying schoolgirl uniforms as both cute and sexy. Thus, the uniform and the trends which translate it affect students. Both construct normative ideas of gender and power that unconsciously impact the learned values of the wearer. McVeigh's research suggests that within Japanese society schoolgirl uniforms affect not only the students who wear them but many aspects of society (McVeigh, 2012).

The studies conducted by Happel (2013) and McVeigh (2000 & 2012) explain the sexualized nature of schoolgirl uniforms. While Happel (2013) explores the physical and psychological impact of the uniform on female students, McVeigh (2000 & 2012) describes how Japanese society has shaped the meaning of the uniform. In this way, both works contribute to the background and need of this study.

## **Conclusion**

The literature that exists on schoolgirl uniforms implies that the purpose of the uniform differs from its effect on students, partly due to the sexualization of the uniform by fashion trends. In addition to documenting the history of school uniforms, Craik (2005) explains that male school uniforms contribute to the student's masculinity but the female uniform conveys



connotations which skew the student's femininity. Hesapcioglu and Meseci Giorgetti (2009) research further defines the intended purpose of the uniform.

The literature written on the popularization of schoolgirl imagery by popular culture documents the impact on women and young girls. Durham (2008) states that the sexualization of underage girls in the music industry, on television, and in movies portrays children as sexual partners. Focusing on Japanese culture, Kinella's (2002) research explains the trickle up of schoolgirl inspired trends in one particular society, while exploring its impact. Lynch (2010) however writes about the trickle up's effect on adult women, suggesting that for some women sexual clothing and fetishized portrayals of females empower women.

The research on schoolgirl uniforms and the trends they inspire suggest a strong impact on female students. In contrast to Craik's (2005) research which suggests that school uniforms place either ambiguous or masculine characteristics upon female students, Happel (2013) writes about the gender bias which stems from the characteristics of female school uniforms. She states that mandatory skirts for students impact how they move and behave, contributing to sexist ideals of femininity. McVeigh (2000 & 2012) extends this theory to schoolgirl inspired trends in Japanese culture.

As shown, the history and impact of schoolgirl inspired trends and the sexualization of the schoolgirl uniform have been researched. However, few studies have been conducted that formally survey the perspectives of students who wear school uniforms and/or women who wore them as children. The current literature asks questions and poses concerns that suggest the need for further research and for this study.

### **Research Methodology**

Throughout many cultures and societies uniforms commonly connote ambiguous meanings. These connotations vary from those of order and control to sexual or fetishized nuances. Of male and female uniforms, female uniforms are particularly sexualized, including the uniforms of young girls. The fetishization of schoolgirl uniforms may be the most common example of this. The common reference to schoolgirl uniforms within pornography and the sex industry reflect the sexualized versions of schoolgirl uniforms in fetish costume and the clothing of subcultures. These trends gain acceptance into mainstream fashion through the media and popular culture (Craik, 2005). However, the effects of these trends on the women who wore school uniforms as children have not been thoroughly researched or documented and thus constitute the problem and purpose of this study.

Within this ethnographic pilot study, I asked the following questions.

- From the perspective of women who wore school uniforms as children, does the sexualization of school uniforms by schoolgirl-inspired fashion trends influence their perceptions of school uniforms?
- Does the sexualization of the school uniform by schoolgirl-inspired fashion trends influence their perceptions of themselves?
- Do the results of this study suggest the need for a larger study?

During this study I documented the experiences and perceptions of women who wore school uniforms as children. I collected the data for this study in one on one interviews with the participants. I then transcribed the responses, coded the data, and categorized the themes related to the research questions.

## **Method**

This study took place in a private Catholic university in South Texas. All but two interviews were conducted within the university library's private study room. I recorded the interviews using an audio recording device with a clip on microphone attachment and my personal cell phone as a backup recorder. Of the interviews not conducted in the library's study rooms, one took place by phone. I called the participant from my personal cell phone, placed the call on speaker mode and recorded the call via the audio recording device. The other interview which did not take place in one of the library's study rooms was conducted in the participant's home. We sat in her dining room and used both my personal cell phone and the recording device to record. In all instances the participants and I were the only people present.

## **Participants**

I used convenience sampling to obtain the participants for this study. I first contacted professors within the university via email, notifying them about my study and providing them with an invitation to participate, which they could provide to their students if they decided to do so. I then sent the same invitation to several colleagues and friends. The last step I took was to place flyers in several locations on the university's campus.

The original criteria to participate indicated that participants must be women over the age of 18 and must be former Catholic school students who attended a Catholic school within the past five years. However, given the low response from those willing to participate I opened up the criteria to include women who attended any school that required a uniform, whether it was a Catholic, Lutheran, charter school, etc. I also changed the age requirements from 18 to 23, to 18 to 39. In changing the criteria I changed the study's research question. Instead of studying the effects of fashion trends inspired by Catholic school uniforms I decided to study the effects of

fashion trends inspire by any schoolgirl uniform. Furthermore, I had originally intended to interview women who graduated high school within the last five years to incorporate women with a greater knowledge of recent schoolgirl-inspired trends. However, I was contacted by several women over the age requirement who were interested in telling their story and contributing to the research. After speaking with my thesis advisor I concluded that participants between the ages of 18 and 39 would poses sufficient knowledge of recent schoolgirl-inspired trends.

I limited the number of participants to ten. In all, I interviewed eight women. The women were between the ages of 18 and 35. The majority of them attended Catholic schools within South Texas. However, one woman attended a Catholic middle school in Michigan and another in Mexico. Several participants included their elementary school history in addition to their middle or high school experiences. While many of the women attended Catholic schools several of them attended Lutheran and non religious charter schools. Furthermore, the majority of participants were enrolled in the Catholic, South Texas university where the interviews took place.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Before conducting this pilot study it was first reviewed by an Institutional Review Board, or IRB. I submitted a protocol which outlined the intent and ethical considerations of the study. The protocol was reviewed once and after several concerns regarding the prescreening questionnaire, follow up interaction with participants, and plans for storing and destroying sensitive materials were met it was approved by the IRB.

I sampled an adult population over the age of 18 that did not involve a sensitive population. However, there was minimal risk to the participants, based on the emotional content

of the interview that may have affected the participants during the interview. Sensitive topics may have included potential negativity associated with the participant's experience with uniforms or the trends inspired by school uniforms. As expressed in the consent form, participants were allowed to decline answering any question or stop the interview at any point in order to further minimize risk of emotional stress.

All documents, participants' records, and interview recordings were secured within password protected computer files. I scanned all documents into my password protected computer and hard copies were secured in a locked file cabinet. I planned to keep all files, including audio files and scanned documents for a period of one year following the completion of the study. Additionally, I planned to shred all hard copies of documents after one year. Apart from signed consent forms, documents did not include the names or any identifying traits of the subjects. I referred to participants by an alias set by myself at the time of their selection and used the alias during all analyzing and reporting of data. Furthermore, the names and any identifying traits of the participants were not to be revealed to anyone at any time.

These considerations contribute to the ethical principles I practiced within this research. My goal for this study was to build upon the existing literature, objectively and ethically. The research referred to in the following chapter not only establishes the validity of this study but exhibits its background and necessity.

### **Interview Protocol**

I conducted this study's interviews with each participant separately. Lasting approximately twenty minutes each, the recorded interviews totaled in over three hours of data. The first section of participant answers included brief histories of their time wearing the uniform, descriptions of the uniform, what they liked and disliked about it, if and how they or their class

mates modified the uniform, how the uniform made them feel, what it meant to them, their feelings today, and what they believed to be the purpose of the uniform. The second section focused on schoolgirl-inspired trends with visual examples for reference. Participants answered if they perceived any trends to be inspired by schoolgirl uniforms and if so a description of those trends. After viewing the sample images participants described what similarities and differences between their uniform and the images existed. The following participant answers included when they became aware of schoolgirl-inspired trends, if they knew of any connotations associated with the trends, if the connotations effected their perception of the uniform or its purpose, if they believe school uniforms create positive or negative experiences for students, and finally if they advocate for the tradition of school uniforms. I culled the answers down to succinct themes and used them to document prominent ideas and feelings.

## **Materials**

During this study's interviews I used a single set of visual aids (See Appendix). The interview questions frequently referenced schoolgirl-inspired trends. In addition to asking the participants to describe any fashion trends they perceived to be inspired by schoolgirl uniforms, I conducted an exercise in which I presented three sample photographs as examples of schoolgirl-inspired trends. I found all of the images on the internet, in either style blogs or fashion photography archives. The images were chosen based on the depicted outfit's resemblance to schoolgirl uniforms, including the style of shoes, socks, skirt, and shirt. Furthermore, I chose images which portrayed various levels of sexuality, ranging from the least to the most sexualized. I found the first image on the style blog *Closet Full of Clothes*, it shows a woman dressed in pointed-toe loafers, a black a-line skirt with shoulder straps over a white blouse, and a leather jacket. I categorized this image as the least sexualized. The second image, categorized as

more sexualized, was found on the fashion photography blog *Japanese Streets*. The image portrays a woman wearing mary jane style heels with white lace ankle socks, a knee length red and black plaid skirt with shoulder straps over a white button up shirt, a rosary worn as a necklace, and a black shoulder strap purse in the shape of a clock. I found the third image on the style blog *Le Happy* and categorized it as the most sexualized. It depicts a woman wearing lace up combat boots over black knee-high socks and sheer black stockings, a blue, black, and red plaid pleated mini skirt, a white tank top with exposed black bra straps, a leather jacket, and a black beanie.

I presented these sample photographs in order, beginning with the least sexualized. In each instance I showed the images after asking the participants if they perceived any fashion trends to be inspired by school uniforms, and to describe them if so. The images were intended to aid the participants that did not perceive any fashion trends to be inspired by schoolgirl uniforms or to add to any trends that a participant was able to describe.

### **Procedure**

I collected the data for this pilot study in eight interviews using a series of 24 consistent interview questions. The interviews were conducted one on one, between myself and the interviewee to ensure the confidentiality of their identities and their answers. The data collection took place over a three month time period. The majority of the interviews took place on the campus of a Catholic, South Texas university, within private study rooms in the library. The interviews lasted from approximately 10 to 30 minutes. For accuracy, I recorded and manually transcribed each interview.

## Data Analysis

After collecting and transcribing the participants' answers I created a table which listed each interview question, each participant's alias, and her summarized responses. For the direct quotes which I refer to in the Results chapter, I omitted filler words such as like and um. Furthermore, I used an ellipses to convey quotes that began in the middle of the participant's sentence or when I omitted a portion of the quote for purpose of succinctness. I reviewed the summarized response table in regard to the three research questions.

While I designed many of the interview questions to document the participants' experiences, I intended for several questions to specifically answer the first two research questions. The following interview questions were meant to answer the first research question; from the perspective of women who wore school uniforms as children, does the sexualization of school uniforms by schoolgirl-inspired trends influence their perceptions of school uniforms?

- What do you believe is the purpose of school uniforms?
- Do you perceive any fashion trends to be inspired by school uniforms and can you describe them?
- Can you identify the differences and similarities between the fashion trends documented in the sample photographs and actual school uniforms?
- Do you associate any connotations with schoolgirl-inspired fashion trends?
- Do these connotations affect what you believe to be the uniform's purpose?

The following interview questions were intended to answer the second research question; does the sexualization of the school uniform by schoolgirl-inspired trends influence their perceptions of themselves as former schoolgirls?

- Did the uniform mean something to you?



- How did wearing the uniform make you feel?
- Do the connotations associated with schoolgirl-inspired trends affect your perception of the uniform's meaning?

For each of these questions I documented the prevailing answers and recorded the number of participants who shared similar responses. I then categorized this data in regard to the three research questions. To further support these findings I reviewed the transcripts for direct quotes and listed them within the results.

This research method contributed to the ethical collection of ethnographic data. I asked all of the participants the same questions and notified them of the ethical considerations put in place for their protection. In addition, while I researched the effects of sexualized fashion trends inspired by schoolgirl uniforms, I purposefully omitted any terms pertaining to sexuality, in an attempt to obtain unbiased responses, the results of which are further explained in the following chapters.

## **Conclusion**

For this pilot study I interviewed women who wore school uniforms in elementary, middle, and/or high school. I designed the interviews to answer the three following questions. From the perspective of women who wore school uniforms as children, does the sexualization of school uniforms by schoolgirl-inspired fashion trends influence their perceptions of school uniforms? Does the sexualization of the school uniform by schoolgirl-inspired fashion trends influence their perceptions of themselves? Do the results of this study suggest the need for a larger study? The interviews were conducted individually with women between the ages of 18 and 39. Each interview lasted approximately 20 minutes and was manually transcribed. I coded

the data within a table to effectively compare the answers and identify the findings which I further discuss in the next chapter.

## **Results**

The interview questions created an open ended platform for the participants to discuss their experiences and their thoughts on school uniforms. I asked the participants to recall their personal histories and to explain their perceptions. Several questions were designed to specifically answer the research questions, while other questions contributed to the participants' stories as a whole. The participants would often switch between explanations of how they felt as children and how they feel as adults. This fluid dialogue produced a wealth of data to analyze. I categorized these findings in reference to the study's research questions:

1. From the perspective of women who wore school uniforms as children, does the sexualization of school uniforms by schoolgirl-inspired trends influence their perceptions of school uniforms?
2. Does the sexualization of the school uniform by schoolgirl-inspired trends influence their perceptions of themselves as former schoolgirls?
3. Do the results of this study suggest the need for a larger study?

### **Question 1**

To determine if schoolgirl-inspired trends impact the participants' perceptions of the school uniform I asked the women to explain what they believed to be the purpose of the uniform. Four of the eight women stated that they thought the purpose of the uniform was to keep students focused on school.

Table 1

*Purpose of the School Uniform: Student Focus*

Participant	Response
Bailey	“if one student is not as well off money wise they still have to wear the same uniform as a person who’s the richest kid in school...they can focus on what they need to be learning in school. And I really like that.”
Daphne	“I think the schools try to make the focus not on the fashion and make the focus on what they’re trying to teach and on devotion.”
Gretchen	“the purpose is to help students stay focused. If you can put everyone in a similar situation and cut out some creativity when it comes to dressing and stuff, people can focus on what’s in front of them as opposed to how they look. And I think, in general it’s a good idea, it’s great to help people learn to be really focused on what’s in front of them.”
Heather	“I think it’s a distraction to have normal clothes...it’s just one thing typically that girls like to invest their time in.”

In addition to this, three of the women expressed that the purpose of the uniform was to decrease the pressures of students choosing their own clothes, such as wearing and affording expensive or trendy clothing.

Table 2

*Purpose of the School Uniform: Uniformity and Equality*

Participant	Response
Charlotte	“I think that the purpose is so that the kids are not worried about who’s wearing what or who has the latest this or that...it makes sense in that regard.”
Francesca	“They just want to keep everything uniformed...and they definitely don’t want people picking on people for not having certain things.”
Heather	“I think the purpose is to basically make an even playing field for everybody. You know, there’s not that judgmental stigma that’s kind of that social queue that might be lingering in the air.”

Once I established the participant's perception of the uniform's purpose I investigated their perception of schoolgirl-inspired trends. I asked the women to describe what they believed to be any current or past trends inspired by schoolgirl uniforms. Four of the eight women identified plaid and/or pleated skirts as a trend that references schoolgirl uniforms.

Table 3

*Trends Inspired by Schoolgirl Skirts*

Participant	Response
Amber	"Plaid skirts, I will definitely not be wearing another plaid skirt for a while. I know that was a trend especially in the 90s and 80's but it's coming back and I' definitely not a part of that."
Daphne	"Definitely grunge, like I was saying about the baby doll [look], the high platform shoes and the socks, and shorter skirts."
Evelyn	"the pleated skirts that they [Americans] use...over there [Mexico] they use dresses...but they're not fashionable."
Gretchen	"Definitely the little plaid skirts. Every time I see them I think about my school uniform."

Five out of the eight women acknowledged that they saw these trends portrayed within movies, Japanese anime, and by musicians.

Table 4

*Schoolgirl-Inspired Trends within Popular Culture*

Participant	Response
Bailey	"I think of anime. I know that the girls will wear the Catholic schoolgirl or just a schoolgirl uniform and for them they modify it to make it less modest."
Charlotte	"Its interesting how its translated into so many different parts of our culture to where, you can watch a movie like <i>School of Rock</i> and you see a 30-year-old-something man with a school uniform on. And it's relatable to ACDC and what they wore."
Daphne	"I know when Gwen Stefani was touring...that was a big thing...just like the whole Britney Spears coming out with the pleated skirt, the plaid, and the saddle shoes for sure...but on the other hand with the schoolboy, the guy from ACDC...rocks on stage in a schoolboy uniform."
Francesca	"When I was growing up whenever I thought of Catholic schoolgirls I thought of anime...[but] they're not as sexy as they look on T.V. or how they present them in cartoons."
Heather	"I think of <i>Chueless</i> because that's what she wears...and <i>Gossip Girl</i> ... some of that high-end fashion that's in there that's not really a school uniform but that is definitely inspired by it."

During the interview I conducted an exercise in which the participants viewed a set of three sample photographs of schoolgirl-inspired trends and compared them to the uniforms that they had worn. I did so to help the women visualize examples of sexualized schoolgirl trends and to create a consistent idea of schoolgirl-inspired trends amongst the participants. The most prominent similarities included the style of shirt, socks, skirt, shoes, and plaid textiles. Three of the eight women said that the white shirts depicted in the photographs matched the shirt they

wore. Six of the participants acknowledged similarities in the depicted socks. Five of the eight women found similarities within the style of shoes and skirts. Additionally, three of the women stated that the use of plaid reminded them of their uniform.

Table 5

*Similarities Between Schoolgirl Uniforms and Sample Trends*

Participant	Response
Amber	“definitely her style of shoes, they’re loafer type shoes and those are what we wore everyday and yes they’re comfortable but they’re not exactly stylish...the white shirts in all of them, we definitely had to wear white shirts and they were always see through...they’re skirts especially... her knee socks...there’s definitely a lot of similarities.”
Bailey	“we would wear those kind of shoes but they would have to be black...the socks are perfectly where they should be.”
Charlotte	“definitely the shape of the skirt and I’m sure that there’s been some uniforms...with the little suspenders...the shoes... remind me of Oxfords a little bit and even the jacket...the blouse and the plaid, the socks with the shoes.”
Daphne	“the idea of a white shirt and skirt...I could see how that would be a schoolgirl...the plaid for sure...we would wear the socks that height too.”
Evelyn	“I did have the stockings, the white stockings and black shoes, but it looks very different.”
Francesca	“The socks are right but you really weren’t allowed to wear boots like that...I don’t understand why we weren’t allowed to be fashionable.”
Gretchen	“the shirt [is] very similar to ours. It has a collar and I’m pretty sure its made out of a cotton-spandex mix. And then the last one has a similar skirt.”
Heather	“This is similar in the fact that our skirts did go up pretty high on the waist and the shoes of course, they’re the loafers...so it’s a little similar. This is definitely more in our realm because its the plaid...we had a green, black and, blue plaid skirt.”

The most prevailing difference between the trends and the uniforms was the length of skirt. Six of the eight participants stated that the depicted skirts were far shorter than those of their uniform.

Tabel 6

*Differences Between Schoolgirl Uniforms and Sample Trends*

Participant	Response
Bailey	“the skirt wasn’t that short, I know it’s a romper but the skirt wouldn’t be that short.”
Charlotte	“our skirt was similar to this it was just super long, of course.”
Daphne	“that [the skirt] is way shorter.”
Evelyn	“our uniform was like all the way down here (points to knee), no pleats it was just a long blue dress.”
Francesca	“definitely too short. I mean I wish we could have worn something more trendy like this but no... [it] would not have passed.”
Gretchen	“they definitely would not be that short, but that’s pretty much our skirt.”

After discussing the participant’s perceptions of schoolgirl-inspired trends and the connotations associated with them, I asked the women if the connotations affected their perception of the uniform’s purpose. Despite four of the eight women stating that schoolgirl-inspired trends connote sexual themes such as fetishes, sexual role play, and the idea of a promiscuous schoolgirl or of either a good or bad girl, all of the women said that the connotations do not impact their perception of the uniform’s purpose.

Table 7

*Connotations of Schoolgirl-Inspired Trends*

Participant	Response
Charlotte	“I did get that whole ‘you’re goody goody’ kind of thing. So I think there’s different connotations that can be associated with it because then there could be something gross and sexual towards it too so it’s across the board.”
Daphne	“I think of the Catholic school uniforms and how they try to make it [into] trends...like a good girl gone bad type of situation.”
Francesca	“I remember...this guy asked me... ‘oh you have to wear that Catholic girl uniform, right?’...and he tried to personify it into this sexy role play thing.”
Heather	“There’s a goth thing that it can be associated with as well. I wouldn’t correlate that to the schoolgirl unless you’re doing a naughty schoolgirl which is kind of weird.”

**Question 2**

To establish if the sexualization of school uniforms by schoolgirl-inspired trends affected the participant’s perceptions of themselves, as former schoolgirls, I first asked the women if wearing the uniform meant anything to them. Four of the eight women explained that wearing the uniform produced a sense of pride for their community or their school.



Table 8

*Meaning of the Schoolgirl Uniform*

Participant	Response
Amber	“Whenever I would leave the school and go somewhere, to me personally, it always meant upholding the reputation. So in a way it did mean more to me than most. I tried to act my best or always look my best whenever we went somewhere.”
Bailey	“I had more pride with my school uniform because I loved my high school so I was like ‘this is where I’m learning theology, this is where I go to mass’...I was proud to wear my uniform outside.”
Gretchen	“I think at some point it meant to me that I was proud of the school I was going to...but by the time I was older I didn’t care. The uniform didn’t make me feel pride or anything like that.”
Heather	“It definitely associated me with the school which I personally really loved the school and...there are very few girls that would say that they don’t like it.”

I then asked them to describe how it felt to wear the uniform. The answers to this question did not produce any consistent themes. One participant stated that they never thought about how wearing the uniform made them feel. Other women explained that wearing the uniform made them feel as though they were either part of a community, focused on their studies, like a clone, or like a child.

Table 9

*Feelings Toward the Schoolgirl Uniform*

Participant	Response
Amber	“I guess it really felt good to be a part of that community, to be accepted like that.”
Charlotte	“I guess it made me feel like a kid because when you’re in middle school or high school, you’re growing up and you feel weird being dressed the same as the little children that are in the same school.”
Daphne	“I was part of that school and part of that community. It wasn’t a very big school so...if anything it just identified that you were part of that community.”
Francesca	“We didn’t care about the stuff we wore. We just went to school to see each other. It didn’t really affect my life at all.”
Gretchen	“It made me feel focused on what was in front of me because I wasn’t worried about how I looked because we all looked the same. But at the same time it made me feel very much so like a clone.”

After discussing schoolgirl-inspired trends and the connotations they evoke, I asked the women if the connotations impacted what they believed to be the meaning behind the uniform. Similar to the question of the effect on the uniform’s purpose, four of the eight women stated that the connotations associated with schoolgirl-inspired trends do not alter their perception of the uniform’s meaning.

### Conclusion

To determine if the results of this study suggest the need for a larger study I first looked at the answers to the two main interview questions:

- Do the connotations associated with schoolgirl inspired trends impact what the participant believes to be the purpose of the uniforms?

- Do the connotations impact the participants perception of the uniform's meaning?

For both questions the majority of the participants answered no, schoolgirl-inspired trends do not impact the uniform's meaning or purpose. However, half of the women acknowledged the existence of sexual connotations when asked what connotations were associated with schoolgirl-inspired trends. In addition, many women referred to these connotations within various points of the interview. These results are further explained within the next and final chapter.

### **Discussion**

The connotations associated with uniforms vary significantly within cultures around the world. These nuances often contradict themselves as uniforms have come to represent ambiguous meanings, including those of authority, servility, order, discipline, and sexual frisson. The uniforms of women have become especially sexualized within popular culture, including the uniforms of girls, such as the schoolgirl uniform. Schoolgirl uniforms are commonly referenced in fetish clothing and within pornography. This sexualized representation of the uniform has since trickled up from the sexual underground into subcultures and popular culture, inspiring both high fashion and mass produced apparel (Craik, 2005).

As discussed in chapter two, the impact of this sexualized schoolgirl image has not yet been thoroughly documented, particularly the effects of schoolgirl-inspired fashion trends on the women who wore school uniforms as children. The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify if and how schoolgirl-inspired trends effect the women's perceptions of the uniform and themselves. I designed this pilot study to determine the need for a larger study. I conducted interviews with eight women who wore school uniforms as children. To determine the effects of schoolgirl-inspired trends I first asked the participants to describe their experiences as well as their feelings towards the uniform and what they believed to be the purpose of the uniform. I

then asked the women questions that focused on schoolgirl-inspired trends. I included an exercise in which the women viewed sample photographs of schoolgirl-inspired trends and explained the differences and similarities between them and the uniforms they wore and if they perceived any connotations associated with the depicted trends. Finally, I asked the women if the connotations attached to schoolgirl-inspired trends impacted what they believed to be the meaning behind and the purpose of school uniforms. After transcribing the interviews and coding the data I arranged the results in reference to the research questions within the previous chapter. I discuss those findings here.

### **Question 1**

The first research question I asked within this study was: from the perspective of women who wore school uniforms as children, does the sexualization of school uniforms by schoolgirl-inspired trends influence their perceptions of school uniforms? To answer this question I first established the participant's perceptions of the uniform by asking the women to explain what they believed to be the purpose of the uniform. The reason behind researching the idea of the uniform's purpose was to identify if the results mirror the concepts found within the literature review. Much of the existing research describes a disconnect between the purpose of school uniforms and how they are both portrayed and perceived within many societies. Within the data I gathered, the most prominent perception of the uniform's purpose was that it was instituted to keep students focused while at school and alleviated the pressures of choosing and purchasing their own attire. Once I identified this perception I then began to research the participant's view of schoolgirl-inspired trends.

I asked the women to describe what they believed to be schoolgirl-inspired trends. I wanted to see if and to what extent the women were aware of schoolgirl-inspired trends. The

majority of women identified the trends as plaid and/or pleated skirts as well as knee-high socks. To better understand the participants' experience with these trends, I asked them to explain when and where they first noticed them. Most of the women first observed the trends in movies, Japanese anime, and as worn by musicians. In line with much of the existing literature, the women confirmed the popularization of schoolgirl-inspired trends within popular culture.

The exercise which followed these interview questions was designed to create a common visualization of schoolgirl-inspired trends between the participants. Furthermore, the purpose of the exercise was to identify the extent to which the participants perceived the trends to convey the schoolgirl look. Of the trends depicted, the women found more similarities than differences. The majority agreed that the style of shirt, socks, skirt, shoes, and plaid mirrored those of actual uniforms, while the only prominent difference they identified was the shortness of the skirt. These observations suggest that while the length of the skirt, which sexualizes the look, differs from the actual uniform, the number of similarities contributes to the trend's categorization as schoolgirl-inspired, despite its sexualization.

To find out if the participants shared this idea of the trend's sexualization, I then asked them if they perceived any connotations to be associated with the trends. The majority of the women answered that the trends conveyed sexual themes such as sexual role play, and the idea of a promiscuous schoolgirl or of either a good or bad girl. I compared this data to that of the question concerning the uniform's purpose. My intent was to compare the women's perception of the uniform's purpose with what they perceived to be the connotations associated with a prevalent depiction of the uniform. Similar to the literature, in that the purpose of the uniform often differs from its depiction in popular culture, the data showed a disconnect between the two.

Upon asking the participants to list the connotations associated with schoolgirl-inspired trends, I asked the women if they believed the connotations effected what they believed to be the uniform's purpose. Despite identifying a blatant and transgressive disconnect between the two, all of the women stated that they did not think the connotations impacted the idea of the uniform's purpose. As a woman who has never worn a school uniform, I first found this surprising. However, several women explained that wearing the uniform and being part of the community shaped their perception of the uniform more so than the depictions of it within popular culture or mainstream fashion. In my opinion, as an outsider to school uniform life, the perceptions of those who have not worn the uniform may not only be more effected by the sexualized depictions of schoolgirl uniforms but they may view the disconnect with greater negativity.

## **Question 2**

My second research question expounds on the first and asks: from the perspective of women who wore school uniforms as children, does the sexualization of the school uniform by schoolgirl-inspired trends influence their perceptions of themselves? To answer this question I asked the women to explain if wearing the uniform meant anything to them and to describe how it felt to wear it. While the data retrieved from the second question did not produce any major themes, the participants agreed that wearing the uniform evoked a sense of pride for their community or their school.

Similar to the last section, I compared this data with that gathered from the question concerning the connotations associated with schoolgirl-inspired trends. Again, a disconnect emerged between how the uniform made the women feel and how the uniform was depicted by the trends. I then asked the women if the connotations effected how they felt about the uniform.

The majority stated that it did not. Much like the first set of questions, after living within a community of school uniforms, the women developed strong feelings toward their uniform, that were unwavering by societal depictions or perceptions.

### **Question 3**

The final research question considers the answers to the first two as well as a culmination of all the data, it asks: do the results of this study suggest the need for a larger study? Despite the first two research questions resulting in negative answers, I believe that overall, the data suggests the need for a second study. The predominant consensus that trends inspired by schoolgirl uniforms convey sexual connotations demands further research. While the connotations may not negatively impact the perceptions of women who wore the uniform, other consequences may exist.

### **Limitations**

Although this study contributed to identifying themes that effectively answered the research questions and in turn suggests the need for a larger study, several limitations exist. The first limitation pertains to the sample population. While this was a pilot study and a small sample size was built into the research design, inconsistencies exist between the demographics represented. During this study, the majority of the participants attended Catholic middle or high schools in South Texas. However, two of the women interviewed went to schools in other regions, including another state and a different country. An equal distribution of participants from different regions, states or countries would increase the validity of the study.

The second limitation relates to the duration and design of the interview. Each lasted approximately 20 minutes. I designed the questions to specifically answer the research questions

but may have limited the length of the interview or depth of the discussion by adhering too firmly to the order, and number of questions.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Consideration for further research should include a larger population. A larger study should adopt an even disbursement of demographics to prevent potential outliers. Additionally, a larger study should equally represent participant characteristics to prevent the possibility of skewed data. Future researchers should consider lengthening the interview process to at least an hour, as a longer interview may produce a more in depth response, thus, more data to analyze. One solution to lengthen the interview time is to increase the number of open ended questions. More of these questions may result in a longer discussion, where the interviewer and the participant are not bound by the parameters of a strict question and answer style interview.

### **Conclusion**

The results of this study defined three major conclusions. The first being that the connotations associated with schoolgirl-inspired fashion trends do not impact the perception of the uniform's purpose, by the women who wore the uniform as children. The second concludes that the connotations also do not impact the meaning of the uniform or the women's perception of themselves, as former schoolgirls. The final conclusion however, suggests the need for further research on the subject. While the first two conclusions state that schoolgirl-inspired trends have little or no effect on the perceptions of the women who wore the uniform, other implications may exist.



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## Appendices

## Appendix A



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## Appendix B



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## Appendix C



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