Chapter 7
Respectable Illicit: Maintaining Control

It’s about being raunchy in the right places.
—Girl, YLC

Introduction
In Chapter 6, the case was made that there is a new norm in relation to the place of the illicit in public spaces. Despite this familiarity, the distancing techniques employed by young people tell us the illicit is not being normalized in ways described by pornification panics. The illicit is still illicit, porn is still porn—it is funny, entertaining, a spectacle. What is different is the space in which the illicit is marked out, through an intriguing flirtation with familiarity and distance, making it possible to describe the emergence of “public illicits.”

This flirtation with distance and familiarity is similarly at work in relation to how the illicit is bordered. Young people are making distinctions about what representations are possible “to bring home,” and what are to be kept at a distance due to their indecency and impropriety. A term that looms large in this distinction is respectability. Throughout all the activities, young people evoke signifiers of the respectable to classify and sort through public illicits. In this chapter I draw on the works of Skeggs (1997) and Strathern (1992), which eloquently trace how notions of respectability structure class, race, and gender, and have come to construct normative sexuality in modernity (see the earlier discussion in Chapter 2).

In the first section I identify how shifting meanings of respectability are working in the discursive negotiations of young people, shifts that reflect the emergence of public illicits as tracked in Chapter 6. The remainder of the chapter will explore how young people employ notions of respectability in bordering “good” and “bad” illicits in
ways that are historically familiar. A picture emerges whereby the control exercised by those exhibiting a raunchy sexuality is vital, a control necessary to create a distance from the illicit, which functions as out of control, as argued in Chapter 3. In addition, control has been crucial to the normal as argued in Chapter 2, a control of body, self, and sexuality productive of the modern self-regulating gendered citizen. This control has implications for behavior, display of self and body, participation in sexual practice, and knowing when to “present” and when to retreat. This control and discipline are also very much connected to historically persistent and value-loaded distinctions based on class and race, as well as heteronormative judgments of gender and sexuality.

**Respectability Does Raunch**

One of the key signifiers of respectability in historical constructions of virtuous femininity is the disavowal of sex, refraining from displays of sexuality, and maintaining “a distance from the sexed” (Skeggs 1997, 118). In Skeggs’ work with women carers in the north-west of England, she argued this was still the case for many women. However, as seen Chapter 6, the terrain has profoundly altered in terms of how displays of sexuality and identifications with the sexed are working for young people, and notably for young girls. As argued by Allen (2008) the “girls want love, boys want sex” mantra is indeed outdated. Throughout the activities with young people undertaken for this study, respectability was not necessarily counter to a display of the sexed. This was revealed very clearly in session three in which the students were asked to construct an advertisement in small groups, with an accompanying slogan, making choices from a series of images (see Table 5.1). What occurred was a wholesale preference to choose sexualized displays to sell jeans by both girls and boys in the classes, pointing to a shift whereby young people are not concerned with disavowing the sexual per se. During my close inspection of the groups as I walked around (and later when viewing the video footage), the use of the most raunchy images in the set was general. In very few cases did the students choose the images that lacked a raunchy, pornified aesthetic. There was no question that an advert had to be sexy, and this was not based simply on preference as I had anticipated. When asked to explain their choices, explanations from the Year 8 class at School 3 were similarly repeated across all ages and schools:

*Me:* Who’s advert uses the slogan Dayam? Why did you pick those?

*Boy 1:* Sex.