Chapter 2
Postfeminism, Girls and Young Women, and Digital Media

Introduction
This chapter provides an overview of the key contextual factors I wish to highlight in situating the media practices and self-representations discussed in this book within “postfeminist” digital culture. It is helpful to remember some of the key concerns of feminist media scholars working in the 1970s in situating the current cultural and techno-social context as postfeminist. I thus begin this chapter by outlining some of the key problems and concerns around the representation of women identified by feminist scholars in various spheres of visual culture—television, art, theatre, and film—in the 1970s and 1980s. I then describe some of the changes feminist scholars of media and culture have noted in the cultural landscape of the late-1980s onward, positioned centrally as postfeminist in terms of cultural, political, and social shifts that were provoked in key ways by the second wave feminist movement. Here I am concerned primarily with cultural shifts. A central shift in representations of women in visual culture noted by Rosalind Gill (2003) is from sexual objectification to sexual subjectification, as I explain. New modes of youthful femininity have been identified in media representations of women, and media and culture aimed at girls and young women. Along with more “active” and “desiring” constructions of sexuality, cultural scholars have noted that in postfeminist mediascapes girls and young women are depicted and addressed as fun-loving, consumption focused, and more “empowered,” active, and bold, physically, socially, and psychologically. Such constructions of femininity can be seen as a response to feminist critique of earlier, weaker versions of femininity portrayed widely in media and cultural representations (Hopkins, 2002; Harris,

At the same time as more active, assertive, and sexually desiring representations of girls and young women have become quite prevalent, a panic around the “sexualization” of culture has erupted (Attwood, 2006, 2009), focused on Western mediascapes, and particularly concerned with the well-being of Anglophone and middle-class girls and young women (Egan, 2013). This has put girls and young women in the awkward position of being called toward active and assertive sexual performativity and displays of strong self-confidence on the one hand, and policed for signals of sexualized self-representation, as well as signals of “low self-esteem” that are thought to result from immersion in a sexualized media culture, on the other. It is important to understand these broad shifts in modes of feminine representation and address to girls and young women in order to understand the meaning and significance of girls’ and young women’s self-representations and media practices today. In the final sections of this chapter, I explain how girls and young women are engaging with digital media, and social media in particular. I outline some of the new possibilities and pressures for girls and young women opened up by social media in order to situate my own investigations into particular digital media practices and representations in the chapters to follow.

**Women and Representation: Second-Wave Feminist Concerns**

More and more, women have been cast on the periphery as whores, sisters, wives, or they are there to be screwed, quarreled over or slapped around. [...] There are no contemporary stories with strong-willed mature heroines. (Edgar and McPhee, 1974, p. 17)

A body of feminist-inspired research into gender roles in the media, and gender socialization through representation, gained momentum in the Anglophone West in the early 1970s, consisting mainly of content and textual analysis of film and television. This work aimed to demonstrate from a feminist perspective how forms of visual and textual representation contributed to the socialization of women and men into normative gender roles (Greer, 1970; Kustow, 1972; Butcher et al., 1974; Edgar and McPhee, 1974; Busby, 1975; Janus, 1977; Williamson, 1978; Goffman, 1979; Tuchman, 1979). At the same time, in the study of Western “high” cultural forms such as visual arts and theatre, feminism was inspiring research into images of women