The distorted portrayal of teenagers in American media is of great interest to me; I was compelled to explore this topic because of our society's obsession with, and expectations of, youth. I researched the traditional perceptions of youth and the reality of being a teenager in modern American society.

My ideas are presented in an installation with photography and sound. I created a room because I want the viewers to place themselves in an enclosed space that evokes the feeling of intimacy and isolation. Two of the walls are covered in photographs I took of my friends that reveal the multiple facets of being a teenager, as opposed to the monotonous teenage life portrayed by the media. For the sound, I created a cassette tape with tracks on both side A and side B. I chose a cassette because although it is one object, it consists of two sides, which I thought to be a good way to convey the duality of American youth reality and representation. Side A contains audio that I consider to be representative of the perception of teenagers, while Side B is supposed to represent the reality of being a teenager.

I constructed my piece with the intention of creating something that teenagers can identify with and find comfort in. I also hope that adults who view my art can reflect on their own youth, and perhaps allow themselves to change the way they treat the current youth.

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My Youth Is Not Yours

Ashley B.

It seems as though modern American society is obsessed with the idea of being young. People write books about it, they make movies about it, and as people get older and start to lose a personal connection to what it feels like to be young, we constantly reminisce over what it felt like to be young. A big part of the glorification of youth in America is the idea that looking youthful establishes an unrealistic beauty standard that permeates all aspects of society. In Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, the adults take soma, a drug used to achieve temporary happiness and to escape from work-related stress, and they are genetically modified to be youthful at death. Although that sounds creepily futuristic and far from reality, it does reflect on the great extent of actions people will take to maintain or amplify the look and supposed feeling of being young. There are several thousands of beauty products, supplements, and cosmetic procedures on the market that are supposed to help one preserve the look of being young. People refrain from frowning and worry over stressing, in fear that it will result in wrinkles and grey hair, two symbols of old age. Although we don't mean to, we also become entrapped in the idea that being a young person is equally as beautiful as the physical attributes of being young. The initial idea that looking young is the physical ideal has been distorted to the point to where even just being young is appealing. However, it is clear that societal behavior towards youth is quite hypocritical. As much as youth is glorified by adults, the reality of being young, specifically being a teenager, is overlooked by adults.

Youth, especially the state of being a teen in high school, is romanticized by the people who have the most control over society, adults. I grew up watching movies and tv shows, created by adults, that glorified being a teenager. It all seemed like a time of fun, reckless behavior and minimal responsibility, and a time of no real legitimate worries. I imagined high school to be smooth sailing and my social life to be robust and lively. I was excited to be reckless, to go to parties, to start dating, to start driving. I'm not sure if I was just *especially* naive, while there was always a small voice in the back of my head that warned me not to believe everything I was told, I remained stuck in a perception of youth that I would first handedly experience to be false. During my research, I went back and rewatched the movies that had so strongly implanted images of what I wanted my adolescence to be. I watched movies like *Pretty in Pink, High School Musical, Grease*, and *She's All That.* These are some of the most well-known teen and coming-of-age movies in our country. All of them revolve around the oversimplified social climate of high school, having the time of your life, and turning bad situations around and into something good. All of them had happy and definite endings. The characters that these movies are centered around are physically attractive, and that is a big factor that contributes to their "success" as a teenager. None of them really touched upon the legitimate concerns that I have as a teenager, concerns like whether or not I am a financial and emotional burden to my parents. Even within the movie, "Pretty in Pink," the main character's grief from her mother's death is swept aside by her high school prom that results in a relationship with one of the most popular boys at school. In fact, the entire premise of the movie is prom. The first thing that the protagonist's father asks her in the morning at the beginning of the movie is whether or not she has a date to prom. I remember as a little girl in elementary school, first learning about prom and becoming so excited for it. After having experienced the superficial social reality of high school, I no longer care about prom.

I also took the time to watch more controversial and raw coming-of-age movies. The two that I chose to watch were "Heathers" and "The Edge of Seventeen." I deeply resonated with Veronica from "Heathers", who deems the social atmosphere of high school to be stupid and a waste of time. In the movie, she regards her state as a "pretty and popular" individual at school to be merely an unsatisfying job. Nadine, the protagonist in "The Edge of Seventeen", takes

antidepressants and has a volatile relationship with the rest of her family. Nadine's brother, the stereotypical popular boy at school, is revealed to suppress his own anxiety and to have made mature decisions that require him to put his widowed mother at a priority. Although these two movies are not quite the most accurate representation of youth either, they were definitely more personally relatable than the "iconic" teen movies I had watched before. But at the end of day, movies like "Heathers" and "The Edge of Seventeen" aren't the ones advertised by mainstream media as the epitome of youth. They aren't the ones you beg your parents to let you watch in middle school because all your friends recommend you watch, the ones they let you watch because they know will leave you with a positive attitude towards become a young adult. "Heathers" is known as a "cult favorite", a movie that is quite problematic in content. It is marketed as a dark comedy film. But sometimes, reality is dark, and youth is a concept that society refuses to allow to be shrouded with darkness.

With the knowledge regarding adolescence I had gained from the media and the youth-obsessed adults in my life, I entered high school with immense enthusiasm and confidence. I had high hopes for high school; from what I had learned by watching these movies, reading these books, listening to adults, I was about to enter the peak of youth. I left school at the end of freshmen year depressed, confused, and frustrated with myself and the world around me. Stress from school, juggling things that needed to be done and things I wanted to do, and social anxiety consumed my entire being. High school was so much more complicated than the version of it I had been exposed to by society. It was a lot more difficult than I expected to fulfill both academic requirements and social expectations. I wanted to focus my frustrated energy on things that I found meaningful. I didn't want to perform tasks just to please others and act a certain way to become likeable, although I knew that a big factor that determines success is whether people like you or not. When I tried to talk to the adults in my life about my problems, most of them just waved them away. "You'll get over it." "It's just a phase." "You're being too negative." "These are the good times. Enjoy yourself while you can, before you enter the real world…" Until a few years ago, I accepted these answers. In fact, I was rather apologetic towards adults for bothering them with my petty concerns when they already had so much weight to carry on their shoulders. But as I got older, I started to question: What makes my difficulties inferior to those of adults?

Depression, anxiety, and poor mental health have become something that is quite prevalent among teenagers. About 20 percent of teens admit to having experienced depression before adulthood, and suicide is one of the leading causes of death for teens.[1] Yet, only 30 percent of depressed teens seek help and successfully receive treatment for their poor mental health.[2] I believe a big player in these statistics to be the societal glorification of youth. Teenagers aren't supposed to be depressed. Adolescence is supposed to be the period of time when you don't have to be caught up in real life problems like depression. Depression and anxiety are issues that you deal with when you're an adult in "the real world," with "real problems" like finding a job and paying your bills. Our problems are unimportant and will eventually fade, and we need to suck it up and enjoy our stupid fun and games before that is no longer an option. It doesn't help at all that these ideas are constantly reinforced by adults, the people whose opinions actually matter. In a study by Princeton University, more than 50% of the 1546 adults surveyed nationwide admitted that the lives of teenagers have progressively gotten worse since 1950.[3] Yet why do adults still continue to

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[1] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
[2] Suicide.org
[3] Bostrom, "The 21st Century Teen: Public Perception and Teen Reality"

perpetuate an oversimplified and elevated perception of youth, a perception of youth that contradicts the modern reality of being a young person, leaving us disappointed and confused?

Because youth is idolized in American society as an era of spontaneity and acceptable foolishness, the opinions and decisions of young people are considered to reflect these traits. There are many adults who say that if we have a problem with society, we should step up and fix it. "The future is yours," they say. But how are we supposed to change anything if we cannot be taken seriously by the ones who are in positions of power? How are we supposed to determine our own secure future if we aren't even allowed to determine our present? An institutionalized bias against the actions and decision-making skills of teenagers persists in our society. Saying bad words as a teenager makes you rowdy and uncouth. Doing the same as an adult makes you slightly foul, but in a witty and tasteful way. Being sexually active as a teenager automatically raises eyebrows. In adulthood, it is simply a part of life. The age restriction for most substances is 21 years old because that is when our brains are fully developed but even at 21 years old it is more than possible to make dumb mistakes that will mess one up for the rest of adulthood. Teens don't always have to mess up; adults do plenty of that as well. For the future to be ours, we need to be able to create a present that allows us the right to take meaningful actions. Adults in society wants us, the youth, to be full of life and excitement, and when we cannot fulfill those expectations, they urge us to change things so that we can. They tell us to advocate for our mental health, our role in politics, and our education. But to them, we are also just teenagers, young people whose jobs are to make mistakes and be carefree, who cannot be trusted to endeavor in bettering society. The persisting perception of youth, the belief that we are the indefatigable, mindless, rambunctious component of society, leaves whatever little trust that remains between us and adults, the designated power-holders, hanging by a single, delicate thread.

The glorification of youth is not something that has existed for all of American society. Up until the 1900s, individuals who we now call teenagers were expected to enter a harsh workplace along with their adult counterparts.[4] The concept that there was a developmental stage between childhood and adulthood was not established until way after changes in child labor laws were made and American society as a whole became more economically stable.[5] It seems as though from a certain point in time, society deemed adolescence to be the period in which one is old enough to enjoy more autonomy, but not mature enough to be trusted with significant responsibilities and understand true hardship. This idea has perhaps led to the glorification of youth, the belief that being a teenager is truly the best point of life, a period where one can indulge and enjoy themselves before going off into the world as an adult with a full-time job and full-time responsibilities.

I truly wish that my youth is a period of time when I can fool around and make mistakes and be okay with it. I wish that I wasn't unhappy to a point where I don't even know the cause of my unhappiness. I wish I could go to every school dance, pep rally, and football game and be completely immersed in the social scene of high school without feeling drained and anxious. Yes, I will admit that there are difficult situations in which I am not held responsible for because I am young. I will admit that sometimes, my actions fall in the category of stereotypical teen behavior. But I am ready to be a fully functioning and productive member of society. I think every teen is, but for so long, we have been conditioned to believe otherwise. I am part of a generation that has been so clearly disillusioned by the divide between the traditional perception of youth and the actuality of being a teenager, a stage in life that the general public has determined to be the

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[4] History.com

[5] Psychologytoday.com

embodiment of youth. We are the youth that long to be adults, but are under the control of adults who long to be young for all the wrong reasons and decide to live vicariously through us by setting clear expectations for our behavior, then either roll their eyes when we meet these expectations or get upset when we get out of line. The glorification of youth helps neither the young nor the old. What we need is a society where one can be young and wise simultaneously, and where the old are willing to accept age as simply a number and not an indication of beauty or certain behaviors.

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