

**Creating and Contesting the Cult of Girlhood:
Magazines, Zines, and the Girls Who Read Them**

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Introduction

What do you want to be when you grow up?

I posed this question to girls I met at the Boys and Girls Club of South Bend, IN. Several told me that their ultimate dream was to become a cheerleader, a goal not uncommon among pre-teen American girls. Although I myself am a cheerleader for the University of Notre Dame, this response, and its implications for girls' futures, is troubling. Why do they focus so much on so trivial an activity? Why not aim for something that is high-powered or intellectual, something that requires substance or character, something that makes use of their diverse talents and fits their many interests? Being a cheerleader may have its benefits, but in many ways it demonstrates what is wrong with being a girl in America today. Although we are in the second decade of the twenty-first century, females are still primarily valued for what they can offer a man. This is reflected in girls' desires to be cheerleaders; to be models, actresses, celebrities- any figure typically approved and lauded by the heterosexual male gaze. This is not a critique of those occupations per say. Yet, a further discussion is needed due to the fact that popular culture often precludes conceptions of girlhood identity that fall outside the scope of traditional femininity.

Socialization towards these norms begins at a young age and occurs through (among countless other influences), a phenomenon I name the *cult of girlhood*. Feminist scholars have written about the nature of female suppression for centuries. What is new is the fact that today, the media works to persuade girls to believe that bending over backward to shape oneself to a mold defined by men is somehow empowering. Emilie Zaslow, a scholar of Girls' Studies, speaks to this trend when she says that contemporary culture has "shrink-

wrap[ped] feminist sensibilities with feminine styling,”¹ a claim I found supported in my own research. This thesis articulates those findings, revealing the ways in which magazines create norms of girlhood femininity through the cult of girlhood. In addition, I explore the opinions and self-conceptions of thirty-three girls aged nine to twelve. By investigating the ways in which they identify with and/or distance themselves from magazines and feminism, I ground my research in the lives of real girls. Lastly, I move forward from critique and hypothesize about the nature of a magazine that would truly empower girls through the creation of alternative culture, a “girl power” zine.

At the crux of my findings is the aforementioned cult of girlhood, a phenomenon that is symptomatic of postfeminist and neoliberal ideologies. Using “girl power” and “individualistic” language and characterized by a heightened focus on celebrities and consumerism, the cult of girlhood creates four distinct norms within hegemonic conceptualizations of American girlhood: 1) the prevalence and frequency of girls self-monitoring and modifying their own behaviors and appearances 2) the “fairytale ending” as a paradigm 3) a suspicion of female relationships, and 4) a privileging of the white, middle-class, heterosexual girl as the primary subject of magazines. Zaslow, however, says, “Yet investigations into girl culture demand a nuanced analysis not only of girl power texts but also of the impacts of living in the girl power era.”² This requires a grounding of textual analysis in the lives of twenty-first century American girls themselves. I achieved this through assembling a research group of thirty-three girls at two South Bend area Boys and Girls Clubs, reaching conclusions that accord with Rosalind Gill’s call to “move away from the view of the media as a totalizing, harmful monolith.”³

¹ Emilie Zaslow, *Feminism, Inc.: Coming of Age in Girl Power Media Culture*, (New York City: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 7.

² Zaslow, *Feminism, Inc.*, 7.

³ Rosalind Gill, “Media, Empowerment, and the Sexualization of Culture Debates,” *Sex Roles* 66 (2012): 739.

In tension with the ways in which the cult of girlhood comes forth through textual analysis of magazines, I discovered that many girls articulate resistant, disinterested, suspicious, and even disdainful readings of the magazines. These findings indicate that girls' understandings of magazines do not always conform to critical scholarly interpretations of them. In fact, conversation and investigation into girls' espousals or rejections of feminism reveals a general endorsement of feminist beliefs. In light and in spite of these findings, the power structures that work to suppress and silence young "feminists" in their incipient embraces of collective social change and unconventional embodiments of femininity must be taken into account. Though no clear panacea lies at hand, the creation of alternative media is a useful reaction to suppression and an empowering tool in the expression of feminist beliefs, an endeavor I embarked upon myself (and facilitated in the girls) through the creation of "girl power" zines.

Current Scholarship and Definition of Terms

I add to and build from current Girls' Studies scholarship that explores similar concepts regarding girls' lives, feminism, and media in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Emilie Zaslow conducts research with seventy teenage girls and explores "their articulations on gender identity, class, sexuality, womanhood, and feminism."⁴ She concludes that girls tend to place stock in feminist beliefs that are primarily concerned with living out successful "feminist lives," and that they do not espouse ideas "of how to work collectively to make these dreams possible, nor do [they] offer suggestions of how to shift social structures."⁵ bell hooks, in the second chapter of her 1984 book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, discusses this "growing disinterest in feminism as a radical political movement." Advocating

⁴ Zaslow, *Feminism, Inc.*, 8.

⁵ Zaslow, *Feminism, Inc.*, 161.

for a definition of feminism that names the term as “a movement to end sexist oppression,” she says that we must reestablish the word’s “positive political significance and power.”⁶ My research adds to Zaslow’s in that I found evidence of more communal, political feminisms in my group of research participants, while it also responds to hooks’ call to take back feminism as a constructive, efficacious, collectively accessible term that accounts for elements of privilege with regard to race and class.

Rosalind Gill has also significantly influenced the trajectory of my research through her scholarship on postfeminism and its eight distinct yet interrelated sensibilities. These sensibilities work together to define postfeminism and describe its function in American culture. Gill’s eight sensibilities of postfeminism include seeing “femininity as a bodily property,” “the shift from objectification to subjectification,” an “emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring, and discipline,” “individualism, choice, and empowerment,” the “makeover paradigm,” a “resurgence of ideas about natural sexual difference,” the “sexualization of culture,” and an “emphasis on consumerism and commodification of difference.”⁷ In essence, Gill’s theory about postfeminism as a sensibility names the trend of an increased focus on the American girl as consumer with the intent and expectation of acting under and pleasing the male gaze.

In addition to these elements, postfeminism as a general ideology pervades contemporary American culture and, by appropriating feminist thought in popular media yet rendering it “revised and depoliticized,” perpetuates the belief that feminism is no longer necessary.⁸ Though using different terms, Susan Douglas also names and describes the concept of postfeminism. She, however, says we are witnessing a media culture of

⁶ bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1984), 238-239.

⁷ Rosalind Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10.2 (2007): 4.

⁸ Judith Stacey in Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility,” 21.

“enlightened sexism.”⁹ Douglas dubs this term a more apt way to describe media’s cultural work due to the fact that contemporary media is “feminist in its outward appearance...but sexist in its intent.”¹⁰ Since the mid-1990s, as a response “to the perceived threat of a new gender regime,”¹¹ Douglas says that enlightened sexism has been put forth to support claims that feminism is no longer needed.

It insists that women have made plenty of progress because of feminism- indeed, full equality has allegedly been achieved- so now it’s okay, even amusing, to resurrect sexist stereotypes of girls and women. After all...these images...can’t possibly undermine women’s equality at this late date, right?¹²

Douglas’s term “enlightened sexism” clearly names the media’s sexist portrayals of women and girls in a new way that incorporates some superficial aspects of feminism through taking it “into account.” I choose to use the term “postfeminism” here, however, because of its temporal implications. Truly, whatever we choose to call it, today the media does indeed serve to perpetuate the notion that America no longer has any need or desire for feminism and its political goals or structural critiques.¹³

Postfeminism is characterized largely by “individualism” and “neoliberalism,” concepts indicative of twenty-first century American culture.¹⁴ Gill defines neoliberalism as an ideology that “construct[s] individuals as entrepreneurial actors who are rational, calculating, and self-regulating.”¹⁵ Neoliberalism is especially relevant to Girls’ Studies because of the ways in which girls’ visibility as consumers has increased in recent years.¹⁶ A heightened consumer profile, therefore, means that girls are positioned and expected to

⁹ Susan J. Douglas, *The Rise of Enlightened Sexism: How Pop Culture Took Us from Girl Power to Girls Gone Wild* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2010), 10.

¹⁰ Douglas, *Enlightened Sexism*, 10.

¹¹ Douglas, *Enlightened Sexism*, 9.

¹² Douglas, *Enlightened Sexism*, 9.

¹³ Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture, and Social Change* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2009), 17.

¹⁴ Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility,” 23.

¹⁵ Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility,” 24.

¹⁶ Anita Harris in Zaslow, *Feminism, Inc.*, 8.

purchase various products in the neoliberal model of self-improvement. In this way, neoliberalism's dependence on individualism creates a political economy in which "power emerges from the choice-making of individuals rather than from structural supports of systemic change," and in which "the emphasis on personal responsibility leads to increasing attempts at self-improving and self-monitoring."¹⁷ Therefore, in bringing postfeminism and neoliberalism together, Zaslow states that, "girl power media culture is rooted in a neoliberal discourse in which urban teen girls come to understand female power as an individualistic stance rather than a collective achievement."¹⁸ Jointly, therefore, postfeminism and neoliberalism work in tandem to create girl power media culture.

Girl power media culture does not necessarily embody feminism, therefore, but "female individualism" in which girls are charged to live lives in which they seek "success...based on the invitation...by various governments that they might now consider themselves free to compete in education and work as privileged subjects of the new meritocracy."¹⁹ In this way, girl power media culture becomes the rhetoric through which postfeminism intersects with media that has pre- and young teen girls as its primary subjects and consumers. In this case, I chose the girl power medium of magazines for close analysis.

History and Nature of Girl Power Media Culture

What I will do specifically in my project, therefore, is utilize both academic scholarship and activist work to achieve the aim of exploring the state of feminism in an era of postfeminism, particularly focusing on the ways in which girls ages nine to thirteen understand feminism, gender inequality, and themselves in a media environment saturated with girl power culture. This entails charting the history and exploring the nature of the

¹⁷ Zaslow, *Feminism, Inc*, 8.

¹⁸ Zaslow, *Feminism, Inc*, 9.

¹⁹ McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, 16.

rhetoric of girl power further. Angela McRobbie, Emilie Zaslow, and Susan Douglas all contribute to the discussion of how the rhetoric of girl power came to be part of academic and popular discourse. They chart its roots in second-wave feminism, its backlash, third-wave feminism, and later the societal anxieties that accompanied these changes. Second-wave feminism, which occurred roughly between the decades of 1960 and 1980, maintained a focus on making the “personal political”- advocating for social change by coming together in consciousness-raising groups with the intent and ultimate purpose of political action. These women made connections to one another and discussed how problems like discrimination in the workplace, marital rape, domestic violence, and inequality in areas such as education and athletics were part of larger structural problems to be addressed by collective social and political movements, not individual choices.²⁰

Later, what came to be referred to as third-wave feminism entered the discourse. Zaslow indicates that third-wave feminism was not “a new philosophical understanding of gender,” but rather “a new feminist strategy” that worked to reclaim, among other things, the “aesthetic femininity” critiqued by many second-wavers.²¹ Therefore, for third-wave feminists, displaying an outwardly traditionally feminine appearance was a site of potential empowerment for women and girls. This milieu set the stage for what is now commonly recognized as “girl power,” comprised of rhetoric, images, and narratives that assert female success, achievement, and dominance. However, with the rise of third-wave feminism and the ways in which it advocated for “the living of feminist lives” rather than a “collective struggle for social, economic, and political change,” many were left dissatisfied with the ways that feminism in America had progressed and the many areas in which it remained unaltered.²² Douglas discusses how, as a result of these years (a period she names “the

²⁰ Zaslow, *Feminism, Inc*, 26-27.

²¹ Zaslow, *Feminism, Inc*, 27.

²² Zaslow, *Feminism, Inc*, 28.

dormant years of George H.W. Bush,” 1988-1992), women were again “insisting on new political and social visibility in the early 1990s.” This period gave rise to the Riot Grrrl movement.

In the early 1990s, Riot Grrrl was first founded to address women’s lack of voice and presence in the punk scene. Stephen Duncombe says that the movement was “a network of young women linked by zines and bands” who were frustrated with the way that they were marginalized and ignored both in their subculture and in mainstream culture.²³ To address this issue, Riot Grrrl came accompanied by a zine of the same name. The zine addressed central women’s issues like violence against women, sexual abuse, and body image. Zines themselves elude definition, but an attempt can be made through description. Existing as alternative forms of culture, zines are self-published and individually written cultural productions whose writer/creators work “against a society predicated on consumption” and “privilege the ethic of DIY, do-it-yourself: make your own culture and stop consuming that which is made for you.”²⁴ Not just “garden-variety hobbyists,” what sets “zinesters” apart is their “political self-consciousness. Zinesters consider what they do as an alternative to and strike against commercial culture and consumer capitalism.”²⁵ Therefore, my decision to become a zinester myself, and have the girls create one of their own as well, was a choice predicated on the zine’s history as part of resistance culture and political activism.

Riot Grrrl zines were one avenue that brought women together in order to form community and advocate for structural change.²⁶ As one woman wrote in an issue of the zine, “We’re tired of being written out- out of history, out of the ‘scene,’ out of our bodies.”²⁷ In making collective critiques of patriarchy, Riot Grrrl was a voice for girl power, yet that voice

²³ Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (London: Verso, 1997), 66.

²⁴ Duncombe, *Zines*, 2.

²⁵ Duncombe, *Zines*, 2-3.

²⁶ Duncombe, *Zines*, 67-69.

²⁷ Duncombe, *Zines*, 66.

also sustained critique for the ways in which it spoke from a white, middle-class perspective. bell hooks elucidates the ways in which Riot Grrrl era feminisms were far too narrow. She says that articulating feminism's goal as merely "social equality with men" does not hold when one considers the inequalities that exist even between men in a "white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal class structure."²⁸

Riot Grrrl addressed the cultural minefield of expectations into which 1990s girls entered, although at the same time its conceptualization and articulation of feminism made room for third wave feminism's insistence on girl power as an individual endeavor. Duncombe roots this trend in Riot Grrrls' desires to resist a single, patriarchal definition of appropriate femininity. "Working hard to free themselves from one definition, Riot Grrrls are understandably reluctant to adopt another."²⁹ Furthermore, the "personalized politics" of Riot Grrrl zines led to a further distancing from 1970s-era feminism.³⁰ bell hooks would indeed find Riot Grrrl Lisa Wildman's statement that "We want the definition of Riot Grrrl to be whatever anyone who wants to use the term wants it to be" to be problematic.³¹ We know this because hooks lamented Carmen Vasquez's statement that "Feminism in American [sic] has come to mean anything you like, honey." hooks describes Vasquez's comment as "a despairing gesture expressive of the belief that solidarity between women is not possible."³² hooks calls for the need to balance both "collective" and "individual" experiences jointly in a political articulation of feminism.³³

Although zines were perhaps too personalized and narrow, they did indeed have undeniably constructive and positive aims due to the ways in which they critiqued a society that marketed an idealized femininity based on the purchase of consumer products. During

²⁸ hooks, *Feminist Theory*, 238.

²⁹ Duncombe, *Zines*, 68.

³⁰ Duncombe, *Zines*, 68.

³¹ Duncombe, *Zines*, 68.

³² Carmen Vasquez in hooks, *Feminism: A Movement to End Sexist Oppression*, 238.

³³ hooks, *Feminism: A Movement to End Sexist Oppression*, 239.

the 1990s, an American Association of University Women study showed that girls left adolescence much worse off than they entered it: less confident and less ambitious than boys their peers.³⁴ Riot Grrrl named the source of this problem in the media and its unrealistic portrayals of women and girls. Duncombe shows how the Riot Grrrl zine was a positive voice for change in this context, “In angry response, Riot Grrrl zines offer a forum to talk back to the demands of the media and men about how woman ought to look or how a woman out to be.”³⁵ Unfortunately, Riot Grrrl and its zines were soon mainstreamed, as girls (and their mothers) were targeted as new market segments through which industry, advertising, and media, “sought to transform girls’ desires for power and change into consumerism and profits.”³⁶ In a culture that couldn’t quite decide what it wanted to make of feminism, this phenomenon was due in part to Riot Grrrl’s focus on individualism and personalization.

What ultimately became the standard is commodified, superficial, white-, and hetero-normative “girl power.” In the late 1990s, mainstream magazines such as *Adweek*, *Brandweek*, *Fortune*, and *Time* all declared that America was in “the era of girl power.”³⁷ This popularized way of thinking about feminism that claims feminism’s past success and present irrelevance in the lives of America’s girls really does an insidious work. By “only mak[ing] girls feel powerful when they are conforming to the cute, sweet, hot little shoppers [marketers] think girls should be,” girl power shifts the burden of responsibility for creating gender equality from patriarchal governments and institutions to the girls themselves, and understanding and articulating what real equality would look like is all the more difficult.³⁸

In this way, commodified girl power fits nicely into America’s ideologies of neoliberalism and consumerism. Girl power’s tenets of “self-improvement, self-correction,

³⁴ Duncombe, *Zines*, 67.

³⁵ Duncombe, *Zines*, 67.

³⁶ Douglas, *Enlightened Sexism*, 24.

³⁷ Zaslow, *Feminism, Inc*, 4.

³⁸ Zaslow, *Feminism, Inc*, 6.

and individual empowerment over social change or state support” make it a perfect site for the political education of young girls in the neoliberal vein.³⁹ In this way, radical ideas for feminist change were “domesticate[d]” and made “into something a bit safer, and much more profitable.”⁴⁰ With the rise of popular girl power media, government support and social change for women’s benefit was replaced by “self-monitoring practices.”⁴¹ Girl power emphasizes empowerment through personal choice, regardless of external factors. These choices, however, revolve mainly around appearance and self-presentation. This “fashion-beauty complex” not only dominates the inner lives of many girls in search of “girl power,” but it also extends to the marketplace as well.⁴²

Girl power took “girls’ desires for power and change,” (expressed in media like the Riot Grrrl movement, *Sassy* magazine, and feminist zines) and placed them in the realm of “consumerism and profits.”⁴³ In doing so, it convinced America that the “purchasing and sexual power” acquired through conforming to an idealized femininity and the performance of the quintessential female activity of shopping superseded real “political or economic power.”⁴⁴ As Anita Harris deduces, this makes feminism something to be bought, but never something that necessitates thinking about real change.⁴⁵

Girl power media manifests itself in television, movies, magazines, and news sources that display “images of imagined power that mask, and even erase, how much still remains to be done for girls and women.”⁴⁶ As part of postfeminism, girl power media creates “anxiety about female achievement,” “objectification of young women’s bodies and faces,” “exploitation and punishment of female sexuality,” the “dividing of women against each

³⁹ Zaslow, *Feminism, Inc.*, 158.

⁴⁰ Douglas, *Enlightened Sexism*, 47.

⁴¹ McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, 19.

⁴² McRobbie, *Aftermath*, 71.

⁴³ Douglas, *Enlightened Sexism*, 24 and 43.

⁴⁴ Douglas, *Enlightened Sexism*, 5.

⁴⁵ Zaslow, *Feminism, Inc.*, 6.

⁴⁶ Douglas, *Enlightened Sexism*, 6.

other by age, race, and class,” and “rampant branding and consumerism.” Furthermore, all these symptoms are made possible through the inclusion of exceptionally powerful and strong women in the media.⁴⁷ By providing evidence for the success of feminism through dominant and powerful women, media can display sexist phenomena because the viewer is “enlightened”- clued in to the implied irony that the sexism is “not meant.”⁴⁸ Since gender equality has supposedly been achieved, there is no need to police media for sexist representations- what appears to be sexist is either “just a joke” or empowering for women because it is chosen freely.

Therefore, what is seen in the media are representations of women that are in many ways deeply sexist. They operate, however, under the guise that the message is somehow different because of a woman’s ability to choose to be empowered or live a feminist life in any role. Douglas discusses how girl power has entrenched the idea that “the true gratifying pleasures for girls, and their real source of power, came from consumerism, girliness, and the approval of guys.” In a moment where women and girls have supposedly achieved more power than ever, what we are really left with is a renewed focus on the centrality of “thinness, beauty, fashion, sexual objectification, and boyfriends to teen girl happiness.”⁴⁹ Mainstream girl power, then, appears to be hollow.

Other scholars have discussed the irredeemability of girl power media in its present state. Catherine Driscoll, Meenakshi Gigi Durnam, and others are doubtful that girl power can represent fully the ideals of feminism given that it is now embedded in mainstream culture and commodified therein. They predict that girl power will “benefit corporations but will not serve girls themselves.”⁵⁰ Indeed, this is precisely what Emilie Zaslow, in her

⁴⁷ Douglas, *Enlightened Sexism*, 16.

⁴⁸ Douglas, *Enlightened Sexism*.

⁴⁹ Douglas, *Enlightened Sexism*, 31.

⁵⁰ Zaslow, *Feminism, Inc.*, 5.

sociological study of girls and their negotiations with girl power media culture, has found regarding girls' identifications with girl power, feminism, and what it means to be a feminist.

Not surprisingly, Zaslow found that the seventy girls she interviewed do not articulate or advocate for "collective social change," but rather "individual change, achievement, and solutions."⁵¹ Therefore, girl power has transformed from a "catchy slogan," to a way in which girls see themselves acting in the world. Voices of radical feminism from the Riot Grrrl past are largely distant and unintelligible for young American girls. Girl power, then, is not about critiquing the patriarchal society in which they live, but primarily about "self-help," "self-improvement," and creating a "life plan" for personal success that is blind to the ways in which women are still advantaged in the second decade of the twenty-first century.⁵²

Methods and Chapter Summaries

Research undertaken into American experiences of girlhood culture as it relates to girl power media occurred through analysis of two sets of primary sources. The textually based primary sources are nine different titles of pre- and young teen magazines: *J-14*, *M*, *TWIST*, *Tiger-Beat*, *Bop*, *Discovery Girls*, *American Girl*, *Girls' Life*, and *Glitter*. The second site of inquiry consisted of a group of research participants at the Boys and Girls Club of South Bend, Indiana through the SMART Girls program. This program stems from the national Boys and Girls Club and has as its aim to "encourage healthy attitudes and lifestyles that will enable early adolescent girls to develop to their full potentials," the acronym SMART standing for "Skills Mastery and Resistance Training."⁵³

⁵¹ Zaslow, *Feminism, Inc.*, 135.

⁵² McRobbie, *Aftermath*, 19.

⁵³ "Health/Life Skills: SMART Girls," The Boys and Girls Club of America, http://www.press.uchicago.edu/books/turabian/turabian_citationguide.html (accessed December 12, 2012).

A close reading and content analysis of nine pre- and young teen magazines, detailed in chapter 1, reveals the many ways in which they promote a “cult of girlhood,” defined earlier as the term for the ways in which girl power media culture interacts with the lives of young girls to achieve a set of cultural norms. Furthermore, I discuss how the magazines are part of the complex intertwining between media rhetoric that displays unproblematic feminist success while enabling the “dismantling of feminist politics and the discrediting of the occasionally voiced need for renewal.”⁵⁴ Indeed, postfeminist media culture by nature includes both feminism and sexism in dialogue with one another, often in contradiction and always in complex relationship.

Chapter 2 details the findings of my sociological/ethnographic study at the Boys and Girls Club. Through conducting the SMART Girls program at two area Boys and Girls Club sites, Battell Elementary and LaSalle Elementary, from October 2012 to March 2013, I interacted with thirty-three girls aged nine to twelve to ground the content analysis of the magazines in the experiences and subjectivities of the girls themselves. Battell Elementary and LaSalle Elementary are in Mishawaka, a relatively homogeneous neighbor city to South Bend. The School City of Mishawaka’s 2010-2011 demographic statistics indicate an overwhelmingly white student population (83%), while family income levels vary with 60% of students qualifying for free or reduced lunches. My research group of girls matched this data closely, although I was not able to obtain specific information regarding family incomes.

The SMART Girls program can be understood as part of a greater societal trend beginning in the late 1990s that accompanied anxieties about the ways in which American girls were supposedly “losing out” on female-to-female mentorship and education. These fears were largely part of the backlash to second wave feminism and its support for creating female identities that moved beyond conceptions of the woman as solely wife and mother.

⁵⁴ McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, 12.

SMART Girls comes under suspicion, however, when one thinks about the ways in which it is symptomatic of neoliberalism. On its face, then, the SMART Girls program seems to be yet another way in which girls are expected to improve and police themselves behaviorally and physically. The program is also problematic in its adherence to what Rosalind Gill sees as the trend of idealizing “media literacy” as a “panacea in debates about young people and sexualization.” Using media literacy as a teaching tool places the burden on the girl for self-education rather than issuing a call for structural change.⁵⁵ Therefore, although a worthy endeavor, the SMART Girls program interacts with feminism in complicated ways. Although I find great value in a program that puts girls at its center, after familiarizing myself with the SMART Girls program and its literature, I concluded that although it is helpful in some respects, its over-arching message is one that perpetuates ideas of postfeminism and precludes radical feminism or broader societal and structural critique.

Therefore, I redesigned the program to be one that provided girls the opportunity to voice their opinions, experiences, and speculations. While I appropriated useful elements of the original program, the main focus of the redesigned program consisted of my own ideas and methods through which I created sessions to get to know the girls, understand how they read and identify with magazines, and explore their thoughts about gender equality and feminism. Therefore, my sociological/ethnographic approach utilizes a variety of methods including surveys, focus group discussions, informal conversation, open-ended journals, creative activities, personal interviews, and participant observation.

Lastly, my project culminates in the creation of a “zine” that interrogates girl power media culture and provides an alternative medium through which girls can access ideas about what true girl power might look like. Namely, this girl power would take into account race, class, and heterosexual privilege and acknowledge a variety of embodiments and experiences

⁵⁵ Rosalind Gill, “Media, Empowerment, and the ‘Sexualization of Culture’ Debates, *Sex Roles* (2012): 736, 741.

of femininity, while at the same time joining girls in a collective structural critique with political implications. By appropriating the format of a typical pre-teen magazine but creating content that explores issues of race, violence, harassment, sexism, and the male gaze, my zine harks back to 1990s-era Riot Grrrl girl power, aiming to take back the word “feminism” and move forward with critiques of various nodes of privilege that still lie invisibly embedded in American culture. This inquiry is important for both feminism and American Studies, especially given that Susan J. Douglas explains how “mass media...fills in those holes marked ‘What does it mean to be a girl?’ or ‘What is an American?’”⁵⁶ Through my project, I add to scholarship on Girls’ Studies, answering questions about how girl power media culture normalizes postfeminist ideas and renders radical feminism irrelevant by shaping pre-teen girls’ worldviews through the genre of the magazine. Through the series of SMART Girls sessions, our many conversations, and the creation of my zine, I hope that in some ways I have helped girls begin to ask new and different questions about the world we live in.

Personal Perspective

The decision to write on this topic stems from an experience I had halfway around the world. Angela McRobbie’s ideas about the way American postfeminist culture operates transnationally are relevant here. She says that today, the “boundaries between the West and the rest [are] coded in terms of gender, and the granting of sexual freedoms.”⁵⁷ This is a discourse in which I entered during the summer of 2012 through an internship in India. Over a period of nine weeks, I worked with the Gandhi Human Welfare Society, gathering information about women’s lives in the rural villages surrounding a mid-sized northwestern city in order to help the organization create “women’s empowerment” programs. Due to my

⁵⁶ Susan J. Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*, (New York: Random House, 1994), 13.

⁵⁷ McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, 1.

American Studies education and knowledge of the ways in which white women have historically posited themselves as saviors and liberators of indigenous women and women of color, I tread softly and thought very carefully about my intentions, interactions, and goals while in India.

In speaking with over a hundred women, I began to notice a recurring theme. Although it was my aim to understand the lives of the women and help the Gandhi Human Welfare Society address their needs and desires, it was in speaking with girls that I was energized with many ideas that could help the females living in those communities. In this way, I came to be more interested in questions about Girls' Studies. Though obviously related to Women's Studies in many ways, Girls' Studies holds potential to reveal crucial questions about culture and gender in any society. In fact, cultural studies scholars Lisa L. Duke and Peggy J. Kreshel indicate that the "early adolescent girl" is the perfect subject with which to begin to challenge "the rampant 'image-mongering' to which [girls and women] are subject."⁵⁸ That sort of work is undertaken here.

Although a short nine weeks in India was not long enough to tackle the next steps of implementing research focusing on girls in India, I returned home with an excitement to explore the ways in which American culture and media shapes girls' identities in the United States. Asking questions about the ideas and self-perceptions of young girls can yield answers about the ways in which media works to entrench ideas about natural sexual difference, anti-feminism, enlightened sexism, and girl power in the minds of American youth. An American Studies approach in particular is useful in tackling these questions given the fact that it allows for a variety of methods. My questions require taking into account history, employing sociological methods, conducting textual analysis, and utilizing an activist

⁵⁸ Lisa L. Duke and Peggy J. Kreshel, "Negotiating Femininity: Girls in Early Adolescence Read Teen Magazines," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 22.48 (1998): 68.

approach, by which I mean research and activities that also serve the purpose of advocating for a specific ideology or point of view amongst my research subjects.

In many ways, this project also stems from my experience growing up in what I see as the early stages of girl power media culture, the mid-1990s and early 2000s. Like Susan J. Douglas claims, I also would assert that, “growing up female with the mass media helped make me a feminist.”⁵⁹ More interesting, however is the ways that it didn’t. I have distinct memories from my early teen years of writing down my New Year’s resolution: “Always look my best.” I recall detailing the ways I would achieve this goal: painting my nails and never letting them chip, applying just the right amount of makeup, blow-drying my hair every day, and eating all the right foods. Why were looks, fashion, and cosmetics the objects of my focus in my young teens (not unlike the “ultimate dream” of many girls to be a cheerleader), and in what ways did the media work to influence these interests? Furthermore, my role later in life as becoming a college cheerleader myself links me with complicated discourses about performing traditional femininity under the male gaze. This often serves to bring about cognitive dissonance in which I am conflicted with regard to the performative and intellectual components of my own identity. Questions about culture, media, and identity as they pertain to my own life are persistently on my mind. My thesis project, however, also takes into perspective the fact that my demographic background positions me as a white, privileged, heterosexual female who has benefited from a lifetime of numerous educational and personal development opportunities. Therefore, as I strive to work from an authentic American Studies approach, I hope to explore Girls’ Studies from a viewpoint that is inclusive of a diversity of girlhood identities and experiences.

⁵⁹ Douglas, *Where the Girls Are*, 7.

Justification for Research

Many Women's Studies and Girls' Studies scholars have called for the nature and content of this research. Angela McRobbie cites the need for exploration into how "young girls look at images of themselves and models and celebrities in magazines."⁶⁰ Furthermore, my project is similar to and builds off of research undertaken by Emilie Zaslow, documented in her book *Feminism Inc.: Coming of Age in Girl Power Media Culture*. My research is different from Zaslow's most distinctly in the fact that I am working with a younger age group approximately a decade later. She too, however, urges scholars to undertake the type of research I am conducting, calling for "ongoing qualitative research with girl audiences" such as research that explores "the ways in which teen girls integrate, struggle with, negotiate, and embrace girl power media culture."⁶¹ My project embarks on these calls to action using the SMART Girls program as an entry point to interrogate what girl power media culture means, ask questions about what pre-teen girls make of it and its relevance to their lives, chart how it fits into the greater discourses of postfeminism and neoliberalism, and ultimately articulate what a site of real girl power would look like.

Despite girl power media representations that portray women as having achieved professional equality with men in fields like forensics, law, medicine, and politics, the top five jobs for women are still pink-collar and relatively low paying ones: "secretary, retail/personal sales, managers or administrators, elementary school teachers, and registered nurses."⁶² Furthermore, the United States still maintains one of the worst systems of support for women among all the developed countries.⁶³ America's welfare system, social security,

⁶⁰ McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, 6.

⁶¹ Zaslow, *Feminism, Inc.*, 10, 39.

⁶² Douglas, *Enlightened Sexism*, 3.

⁶³ Douglas, *Enlightened Sexism*, 20.

divorce laws, and public childcare are far inferior to peer nations with regard to the ways in which they disempower women economically, professionally, and socially.⁶⁴

Violence against women has not been curbed either. Each year, 1.9 million women fall victim to violence at the hands of their boyfriends or husbands. Rape culture pervades society; 18% of all women and girls are the victims of either an attempted or completed rape. In the paid workforce, women still make only seventy-five cents to the man's dollar, and unpaid countless hours of work in the home vastly outnumber the domestic labor done by males. All females are subject to the struggles of negotiating postfeminist media culture. Women of color, however, and especially African-American and Latina women in America, are egregiously stereotyped by the media, disproportionately poor and abused, and the overwhelming majority of those who receive low-quality healthcare. Therefore, more needs to be done to truly empower girls and women in America, and the illusions of postfeminism and girl power have done little to help this cause. Examining the ways that girl power media affects girls and their self-images, goals, and interests, is a good place to start in attempting a structural critique.

⁶⁴ Ann Crittenden, *The Price of Motherhood: Why the Most Important Job in the World Is Still the Least Valued* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2001).

Chapter One: A Textual Analysis

Although magazines' centrality to cultural constructions of femininity reaches back centuries, in 1963 Betty Friedan struck a chord with American women when she remarked on the significance of women's magazines to (white, middle-class) female identity in her *Feminine Mystique*, regarding magazines' construction of a "single, overprotective, life-restricting, future-denying" existence for women as deplorable. Today, we see a similar cultural force at work through pre- and young teen girls' magazines' creation of the cult of girlhood. Similar to the ways in which Friedan cited 1960s-era women's magazines as tying a woman's identity intrinsically to "heterosexual romance, marriage, and motherhood," pre- and young teen girls' magazines today issue norms about girlhood culture. Namely, standards are inscribed through the cult of girlhood: a force that oppresses, limits, and marginalizes feminine identities that fall outside those norms.¹

Women's magazines manufactured a "cult of femininity" and served as "propaganda machines" to promote the "beauty myth" that women could achieve idealized femininity through proper care, hygiene, technique, and lifestyle.² Girls' magazines serve a similar homogenizing cultural work in need of evaluation, yet their functions differ in significant respects. Girls' magazines vary primarily in obvious distinctions such as average reader age and nature of the content, but more subtly in aspects like political goals of the text, readership vulnerability, and norms inscribed. Analyses of teen and girl magazines are somewhat scarce;

¹ Dawn H. Currie, *Girl Talk: Adolescent Magazines and Their Readers*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 23.

² Currie, *Girl Talk*, 4.

with exploration and content analysis of girls' and young teen magazines, I hope to fill part of that void.

Drawing from critical analysis of girls' magazines in the twenty-first century, I wish to elucidate the cult of girlhood. As stated earlier, the cult of girlhood is a force made possible by the ideologies of postfeminism and neoliberalism. Using "girl power" and individualistic language, and characterized by a heightened focus on celebrities and consumerism, the cult of girlhood inscribes four norms into hegemonic conceptions of American girlhood femininity: 1) self-monitoring and modification of appearance and behavior 2) the fairytale paradigm 3) a suspicion of female relationships, and 4) the white, middle-class, heterosexual girl as the primary subject.

The cult of girlhood helps make sense of the contradictions within postfeminism and girl power media culture. The ways in which magazines portray girls as neoliberal consumers operating under the male gaze while at the same time claiming to empower them through this limiting model is confusing. Therefore, the cult of girlhood is a framework through which we can understand how girls' magazines function in American culture, revealing the ways in which girl power media is a pedagogical and reifying force through which girls are socialized into norms and standards of acceptable femininity. This project is relevant because, by the time girls reach young adulthood and take up reading women's magazines, scholars have found that "women's attachment to the values of domesticity and heterosexual romance has already begun." Furthermore, "Available research links these romantic visions to teenzine content."³ To name the cultural work that is done through the content of these magazines, therefore, we need to understand the cult of girlhood.

³ Currie, *Girl Talk*, 43.

Magazine Descriptions

Analysis of the nine most popular pre- and young teen magazines titles is the means through which the cult of girlhood emerges. The titles I researched, *J-14*, *M*, *TWIST*, *Tiger-Beat*, *Bop*, *Discovery Girls*, *American Girl*, *Glitter*, and *Girls' Life*, were chosen because they were suited to the age ranges of the girls with which I worked. The magazines I selected can be found in almost every bookstore or grocery store, and their popularity was confirmed through discussion with my research participants. The nine magazines fall into three categories, depicted in the following table.

Magazine Categorization Table

Celebrity-focused magazines	<i>J-14, M, TWIST, Tiger-Beat, Bop</i>
Pre-teen magazines	<i>Discovery Girls, American Girl</i>
Young teen magazines	<i>Girls' Life, Glitter</i>

Although many of the magazines share overarching themes, each varies slightly in terms of its mission, structure, and content. What they have in common, however, is the theme of girl power as articulated by Zaslow when she says, “girl power quickly moved beyond a catchy slogan to represent a cultural moment in which girls not only had an increase in purchasing power, but also required industry executives to create a new consumer profile.”⁴ Indeed, postfeminism in collision with corporate desire to reach this new market segment explains the impetus behind the cult of girlhood’s focus on consumerism.

Among the celebrity magazines, *J-14*, *M*, and *TWIST* are all owned by the same publisher, Bauer Publishing. As the parent company of *InTouch* magazine, these three titles, aimed at girls aged nine to fourteen, focus heavily on celebrity culture. *J-14* is branded on its website as “THE all access destination for teens with a passion for pop culture.” *J-14*

⁴ Emilie Zaslow, *Feminism, Inc.: Coming of Age in Girl Power Media Culture* (New York City: Palgrave MacMillian, 2009), 3.

references empowerment also, its website stating that, “Teens also look to *J-14* for real-life stories of every day teens doing extraordinary things.” Although linked by their focus on celebrity obsession, *TWIST* is fashion, fitness, and beauty-oriented, while *M* is known more for its “interactive content” like DIY tutorials and quizzes. *Tiger-Beat* and *Bop* are owned by Laufer Media, Inc. and have celebrity-saturated content. Generally, however, these five magazines are nearly interchangeable, with common visual themes of busy, bright-colored covers and pages; claims to insider access to young, popular celebrities; and a far greater amount of images than text.

The second category, pre-teen magazines, is targeted towards girls aged approximately eight to twelve and contains more subdued, reader-centered themes. *Discovery Girls*’ motto, “By girls, for girls,” is indicative of the fact that much of the content is produced by young girls whose images also appear throughout the magazine. Its website claims its mission is to be “a destination where tween girls can connect with other girls and discover helpful tips for handling life’s ups and downs.” Girl power rhetoric can be found through the website’s statement that *Discovery Girls* “empowers girls to celebrate who they are and strive to realize their full potential.” The other pre-teen magazine, *American Girl*, has as its motto “celebrating girls and all that they can be.” Although created in conjunction with a line of popular, American history-oriented dolls, *American Girl* surprisingly does not place a high focus on consumerism, but rather emphasizes reader content in a similar manner to *Discovery Girls*.

The category of magazines for young teens has two titles, *Girls’ Life* and *Glitter*. Although *Girls’ Life* is intended for ages ten and up, its more mature content lends itself towards girls in adolescence. The topics it covers, particularly in the “Dear Carol” section, are substantive and often cover taboo issues like sexual abuse, death, and parental infidelity in a frank manner. Once known for its resistance to the celebrification of magazines, *Girls’*

Life now typically has a female celebrity on its cover. *Glitter*, a less-popular magazine, is heavy on promotion of both consumerism and celebrities, although the celebrities it features are not well known. The form, however, is unique in that there are multiple long, in-depth interviews with each celebrity as well as interviews of “real people” and professionals in the “ask an expert” section. Its subtitle, “For Girls Who Rock!” is characteristic of girl power rhetoric.

The fact that almost every one of these titles claims to empower girls in some way is indicative of their nature as part of girl power media culture. The purpose of this analysis, however, is not to determine definitively whether or not pre- and young teen magazines are living up to claims of girl power. That endeavor would be beyond the scope of this paper, requiring extensive probing into girls’ lives and a cause-and-effect linkage affected by countless factors. However, because of the ways in which the missions, mottos, titles, and rhetoric put forth by these magazines indicate the goal of empowering girls, I feel it is justified to view them through that lens.

After analysis of the magazines, it is clear that they are a powerful cultural force. The particular set of themes and norms put forth, the cult of girlhood, is symptomatic of the ideologies of postfeminism and neoliberalism, uses the language of girl power and individual choice, is characterized by a focus on celebrities and consumerism, and makes normative four aspects of girlhood femininity. These norms include the need for self-policing, a perpetuation of the fairytale paradigm, a heightened suspicion of female relationships, and the assumption of girl power media’s subject as white, middle-class, and heterosexual. Appendix A gives a full list of the titles of articles analyzed to reach these conclusions.

Evidence for the Cult of Girlhood

Neoliberalism and Individual Empowerment

The ideology of neoliberalism and the language of individual empowerment (as aspects of the cult of girlhood) can be grouped together in demonstrating the ways in which magazine articles create this phenomenon. Here, Rosalind Gill's theories about the ways in which neoliberalism weights girls with especially heavy expectations can be applied. She says, "On the one hand, young women are hailed through a discourse of 'can-do' girl power, yet on the other their bodies are powerfully re-inscribed as sexual objects."⁵ This articulates the contradictions found in the genre of pre- and young teen girl magazines, especially when seen through the ideology of neoliberalism. Articles such as "The Best Sweaters for Your Body" (to be analyzed later), in which girls' bodies are segmented and dissected, are tolerated alongside articles that imply that body image is an issue to be handled personally within the hearts and minds of each girl singly.

In *Glitter*, we find an article that gives us the purported real voices of girls who write about their opinions on the topic of body image. This article fits the neoliberal and individual empowerment framework through statements that charge girls to take on body image as a personal issue, not one that should be addressed through critique of sexist media. Readers make statements like, "People will always look at you in the hallways and think a certain way about you but you need to ignore it," "No I don't feel self conscious about my body because I don't let other people's comments bring me down," and "Back in middle school I used to feel really self conscious about my body...Now that I'm older I learned to acknowledge my body the way it is and now I really like my body." Overcoming body-image anxiety is posited here as an inevitable issue that each girl must handle individually as she ages through accepting her body and resisting others' negativity. Therefore, what is lost in seeing the issue of body

⁵ Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture," 23-24.

image through a neoliberal, individualistic lens is a strident call to end sexist portrayals of female bodies, particularly girls' bodies. In its place, we find words and images that seek to empower girls to overcome the issue with a positive attitude of self-acceptance. I argue that a critique of more depth is needed, one that does not place blame and further duties on individual girls and women themselves.

Similarly, articles pertaining to individual empowerment abound in the magazines, almost always in advice columns, but also in feature-length articles and quizzes. "What's Your Confidence Color?" found in the December 2012 issue of *Bop!* is one such article that seeks to imbue girls with illusions of confidence through linkage with consumer choices. Through a short six-question quiz, readers are invited to pick between responses that correspond to three colors: purple, pink, or orange. The aim of the quiz is to "...find out the hot color trend you should rock!,"⁶ implying the purchase of items of that color. Ellen McCracken speaks to this phenomenon, saying that children's and young adolescent magazines "initiate readers into the world of female consumption," a world that is "sustained" by the creation of feelings of "female inadequacy."⁷ This article, then, implies and promotes the possibility of girls' lack of confidence, offering as a solution the purchase of consumer goods. Buying products in one's "confidence color" links neoliberalism to consumerism, becoming an injunction to empower oneself through personal consumer choices. In addition, the qualities and colors presented as able to provide "confidence" are restrictive. The article states that if your color is purple, you are "sophisticated and totally glam," that orange implies you are "playful and confident," and that pink indicates "sweetness." Here we can see the image of the ideal girl put forth, one that is overwhelmingly nice, non-threatening, and superficial.

⁶ "What's Your Confidence Color?," *Bop!*, December 2012, 92.

⁷ Ellen McCracken, *Decoding Women's Magazines from Mademoiselle to Ms.*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 137.

Girls' Life also promotes the idea of individual empowerment for a slightly older audience in its article "Frame of Mind" by Katie Abbondanza. Here girls learn that simply by changing their frame of mind they can solve many of life's problems. As the article states: "Here are some surprising switches that will have you loving your life- no matter what."⁸ This article ignores sexist oppression and literally demands personal change of the reader at all costs, making statements like "Whether they're 'just sayin'' your jeans look tighter than usual or dissing your singing style, these comments can totally bring you down. Not anymore. Tell yourself they're just words and they can't hurt you. Then believe it. Rise above the petty remarks by oozing confidence wherever ya go."⁹ A preferred suggestion would be one that calls out unrealistic body standards as an unhealthy feature of our culture as well as places shame on the boy or girl with the audacity to make comments about another's weight.

Other pieces of advice include "...instead of letting these bummers bring ya down, slap on a smile and pretend that all's right in the world." It is no wonder many girls lack a vision of resistance or any vestiges of anger with regards to sexist oppression, as they are told by the magazines they look to for advice that the solution to their problems is essentially to smile through the pain. This relates directly to relationships with boys as well. Abbondanza says, "Say you found out your BF had been cheating on you. Well, now you know to be much more aware of signs a guy might be straying." Instead of advice that places partial blame on the girl for not being vigilant enough to recognize warning signs of this behavior, girls should hear messages that critique male infidelity or abuse.

Two articles that also seek to empower girls, and therefore operate within the ideologies of neoliberalism and individual empowerment, are found in *American Girl* and *Discovery Girl*. *American Girl*'s article "Classroom Confidential" is meant to relay "Things

⁸ Katie Abbondanza, "Frame of Mind," *Girls' Life*, December/January 2013, 44.

⁹ Abbondanza, "Frame of Mind," 44.

you need to know for tackling back-to-school troubles.”¹⁰ It addresses practical and logistical issues that may help prepare a pre-teen to enter middle school, such as “homework,” “being prepared,” and “locker trouble.” *American Girl*, however, brings issues of class to hand, as at \$20.00 for a six-issue subscription is the most expensive of the magazines I analyzed. As a result, *American Girl*, unlike all the other magazines, is without advertisements. This means that one’s financial state is partly determinative of the amount of consumer exposure one receives at a young age, a factor that could potentially create magazine experiences and encounters distinct to and indicative of one’s family income.

Discovery Girls’s article “Overcome Your Shyness” also approaches the issue of girl power.¹¹ By advising girls on how to become more comfortable meeting new people, interacting in groups, and talking in class, this article could potentially make a difference in the lives of girls who consider themselves shy, yet it cannot escape the rhetoric of individual empowerment to solve this problem. Of note, however, is that unlike “What’s Your Confidence Color,” this article does not impose or assume anxieties about the reader. Before the article begins, there is a short survey with the title “Do these things happen to you?” This way, readers are not automatically generalized as shy, but rather can choose to identify with the quality or not. In addition to analysis of articles that pertain to neoliberalism and individual empowerment, the magazines evinced the cult of girlhood through subscribing to postfeminist ideologies and girl power rhetoric.

Postfeminism and Girl Power Rhetoric

Postfeminism and girl power rhetoric can be paired as joint facets of the cult of girlhood. The entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist rhetoric, found in magazines through articles that promote consumerism and conventional beauty as empowerment, is

¹⁰ “Classroom Confidential,” *American Girl*, September/October 2012, 15.

¹¹ “Overcome Your Shyness,” *Discovery Girl*, October/November 2012, 22-23.

what indeed characterizes postfeminism. Zaslow articulates this when she says, “Girl power is a watered-down feminist position available as a stylish accessory, but it is also a meaningful and widespread embodiment of some feminist positions that girls draw upon as they create gender identities.”¹² The ways in which girls appropriate girl power rhetoric will be discussed further in chapter 2, but here I will analyze several articles in which we find this sort of diluted feminism.

In the *Glitter* article previously discussed, we find a full two pages of text devoted to the “Body Image Survey.” Here girls respond to three questions about body and weight that probe whether girls are worried about weight, whether they talk to their friends about it, and if they are self-conscious about their bodies. Some truly positive messages can be found here, and the following statement is indicative of many of the responses: “I realize that no one is perfect and I love my body the way it is with the perfections and imperfections. I do not read magazines or watch TV as much as I used to which has helped divert my attention from Photoshopped bodies.”¹³ Other girls discuss the same challenge of facing pressure to be thin and living in a culture where thinness is privileged. To cope, girls cite their use of tactics like getting advice from mothers and friends, focusing on athletics, but primarily the response is to merely acknowledge it as an issue that simply requires an attitude change. This reveals postfeminist ideologies, therefore, through the ways in which we see the intertwining of this feminist rhetoric within a magazine that promotes body anxiety in multiple other ways. In addition, girl power rhetoric can be found in other articles whose titles indicate the acquisition of some sort of power, usually through self-education or self-help. Some examples of these articles include “The Power of You-th,” “Fearless,” “Overcome Your Shyness,” “Ask an Expert,” and “Frame of Mind.”

¹² Zaslow, *Feminism, Inc.*, 9.

¹³ Angela, “Body Image Survey,” *Glitter*, Fall 2012, 106.

Consumerism & Celebrities

Little has been written about the role of celebrities in girls' magazines, but what is apparent is a connection between a heightened focus on celebrities and its ties to consumerism. Given that many young girls (some in my case study at Mishawaka public schools) take celebrities as their role models, many magazines see it fit to display popular celebrities adjacent to consumer products. Additionally, consumerism's role in girls' magazines is more insidious than it appears at first glance, detected in scholar Ellen McCracken's judgment regarding the unstated effects of both celebrity and product placement: "The attractive presentation frequently disguises the negativity close at hand: within this discursive structure, to be beautiful one must fear being non-beautiful; to be in fashion, one must fear being out of fashion; to be self-confident, one must first feel insecure."¹⁴ Not surprisingly, the implied solution to these (created or exacerbated) anxieties lies in the purchase of products, often featured in the magazine articles themselves. Therefore, apart from the potential negative effects associated with focusing on celebrities, the high rate with which they are included in magazines also contributes to the issue of consumerism in girls' magazines. Additionally, the "negativity close at hand" relates to the ways in which consumerism requires self-surveillance.

Self-Surveillance

Key to the presentation of normalized appearances and behavior is what Rosalind Gill calls "self-surveillance, monitoring, and discipline," whereby women (and girls) have experienced a shift "from an external, male judging gaze to a self-policing narcissistic gaze."¹⁵ Through this norm of postfeminist culture, females are now expected to give

¹⁴ McCracken, *Decoding Women's Magazines*, 136.

¹⁵ Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture," 4.

“anxious attention” to all parts of the self, regulating body, mind, and presentation of the two in order to conform to the male gaze.¹⁶

One example of such self-surveillance with regard to behavior is found in the article “What I’m looking for in a girlfriend!,” published in *M* magazine in December 2012. Written by *M* magazine’s writers, this segment seeks to translate young emerging pop singer Austin Mahone’s preferences in a potential girlfriend to “eager” readers. This intent promotes self-surveillance under the male gaze via relating Mahone’s thoughts and opinions on girls. During *M*’s photo shoot with Mahone, they relay that he prefers a “cute,” “cool,” “chill,” and polite girl. To reinforce that fact, the images of three squeaky-clean young actresses at the bottom of the page are shown as Mahone’s “major love confessions.” At the end of the article, *M* says that, “Austin isn’t stressing about still being single- he knows that the perfect girl will come when he’s ready, and he’s happily waiting for her.”¹⁷ This role of not “stressing” to find a significant other, however, is not the article’s implication for female readers. Rather, the pre-teen or young teen girl reads here reads the ways in which she should curtail her personality so that it better conforms to a male’s preference. That is, the girl does not have the luxury of just “waiting around” for a boy to find her, but must continually remake herself into the image of the ideal girl.

Under the mode of self-surveillance, she must be working at all times to shape her personality into one that appeals to men. The article reads: “An instant turn-off is probably rudeness,” he explains to *M*, “Yeah, I don’t like when someone is rude and gives attitude for no reason.” To this preference of Mahone’s, the writer replies: “Got it!” With this exclamatory remark, *M* seems to speak on behalf of its readers, affirming the somewhat disturbing quality of refraining from “giving attitude for no reason.” As subjective as this expectation is, the article suggests that Mahone would be omniscient in his knowledge of

¹⁶ Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” 12.

¹⁷ “What I’m looking for in a girlfriend!,” *M*, December 2012, 35.

reasons for “giving attitude,” ignoring the ways in which a girl could have her own opinion on a matter and want to express it accordingly. In sum, the article reads like a classified ad for a girlfriend, but one in which there is no description for the boy because it privileges him and his preferences while the girl is expected to conform to his desires. The article even uses this rhetoric of preparation and examination, saying, “And if you pass Austin’s test, you’re in for a treat- he’s one of the sweetest guys we’ve ever hung with.”¹⁸ This article is only one of many whose main message promotes self-surveillance in girls.

Another example of an article that encourages anxiety and self-consciousness is found in the October/November 2012 issue of *Girls’ Life* and is entitled “OMG! Sitch-saving advice from the OMG Girlz.” The three girls, whose stage names are Star, Beauty, and Babydoll, give advice on how to handle a number of “embarrassing situations,” including “get[ting] rejected by a guy,” “f[alling] on the dance floor,” telling a joke that no one laughs at, and thinking that “your crush was waving to you...but he wasn’t.”¹⁹ This column is a slight variation on almost every magazine’s inclusion of an “embarrassing moments” section. What is interesting is the fact that, when I gave my zine to the girls at LaSalle, after flipping through it casually, they immediately became fixated on the section entitled “Embarrassing Moments...NOT!” It does seem as if girls have a high degree of interest in these sections, but the ideology behind them does much to reinforce self-surveillance. McCracken explains the outcome of these “advice” articles by saying that although they are not always the cause of self-consciousness or “anxiety,” they do “encourage and exacerbate” those sorts of emotions from a young age.²⁰ If one considers the fact that almost half of the situations pertain to “failing” under the male gaze, it is not surprising that adolescence becomes such an “embarrassing” time for many adolescent girls. Though both girls and boys are experiencing

¹⁸ “What I’m looking for in a girlfriend!,” *M*, December 2012, 35.

¹⁹ “OMG! Sitch-saving advice from the OMG Girlz,” *Girls’ Life*, October/November 2012, 57.

²⁰ McCracken, *Decoding Women’s Magazines*, 138.

physical and mental changes, it is not likely that boys are encouraged to monitor their behaviors (or think about the possibility of those aberrant behaviors) in such a way that assumes a judging, evaluative female presence as the source of primary anxiety.

In addition to articles that relate to regulating behaviors, the arena in which themes of self-policing are most typically found are in the fashion and beauty portions of the magazines. One such article was in the December 2012 issue of *TWIST*. Entitled “The Best Sweaters for Your Body,” it features the full-length photographs of four celebrities with almost identical body types. Although primarily in the category of self-surveillance, these pages also have clear themes of celebrification and consumerism, as it is not normal bodies or faces that are featured but rather those accepted to be amongst the most attractive of society. Adjacent to the celebrity, who wears a sweater, are brand names, websites, and price tags to indicate where a similar style may be purchased.

Cleverly, however, the article avoids directly naming a fault with the female body, implicitly leaving it up to the reader to deduce what the issue would exactly be. Four various ways to go about choosing a sweater “for your body” are detailed here. Each corresponds to a particular body flaw: “To add curves- try stripes,” “To minimize your stomach- try buttons,” “To flatter a large chest- try cowl neck,” and “To lengthen your torso- try long.”²¹ It is key here to remember that *TWIST* is targeted at pre-teens. Therefore, before girls even reach adolescence, they are being encouraged to monitor their young and growing bodies’ “faults” of ultra-thinness or lack of “curves,” a less-than-flat stomach, too large of breasts, or a short torso, and then undergo pressure to solve those problems through consumerism. Girls learn that their bodies are problems to create “illusion[s]” around, “disguise,” and “downplay,” as these are all actual terms used in the article in the context of using sweaters to change the appearance of one’s body.

²¹ “The Best Sweaters For Your Body,” *TWIST*, December 2012, 75.

This rhetoric illustrates what Ellen McCracken discusses when she refers to the high incidence of product placements in advice columns in magazines. She says that these work to inculcate “readers at an early age to look critically at their bodies and be ashamed of parts that do not fit the established model...readers [are] advised to use clothing and accessories to draw attention to certain parts of their bodies and away from others.”²² This is exactly what is demonstrated here when readers learn (from celebrities) to use clothes to disguise or display their bodies. As readers are encouraged to use clothes to manipulate appearances, it is implied that they are doing so under the male gaze. Operating under an evaluative male eye is in many ways due to the fact that the fairytale paradigm, finding a future husband and living happily ever after, is the focus of much of girls’ magazines.

The Fairytale Paradigm

The fairytale paradigm is a concept that relates to the socialization that takes place through the focus on heterosexual love and the romanticization of boyfriends, falling in love, and “decorating [oneself] with cosmetics and fashion to secure a man’s love.”²³ By “fairytale,” therefore, I mean a narrative in which male love, approval, and pleasure is sought and the ideal embodiment of femininity is found in the vulnerable “princess.” The fairytale as a narrative form is by no means untouched by feminist critics, as women writers have been commenting on and reappropriating the form since the seventeenth century. Furthermore, I strive to move beyond Susan Grubar’s critique of “fairytale critics” who at times fall into the “intellectually vapid” habit of “treat[ing] every text as grist for a mill that proves the...point that racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia reign supreme.”²⁴ Given that the text she refers to are fairytales themselves, however, my analysis differs in that I name a paradigm

²² McCracken, *Decoding Women’s Magazines*, 139.

²³ McCracken, *Decoding Women’s Magazines*, 137.

²⁴ Donald Haase, *Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), ix.

whose qualities are reminiscent of the dominant socializing work of fairytales. In addition, I draw attention to the disturbing fact that a focus on winning male approval is begun so early, in girls as young as nine.

Through girls' magazines, the fairytale paradigm is promoted through a variety of tactics, from feature articles and quizzes to the inclusion of posters and advice columns. In essence, however, I argue that the fairytale paradigm should be questioned because of the fact that it leads to what McCracken says is characteristic of girls' magazines. Namely, that they have an "exaggerated concern with physical appearance so that other aspects of the complete human being are undervalued,"²⁵ contributing to the creation of a culture in which, for girls, pleasing the male gaze is of primary importance.

Notwithstanding the ways in which this paradigm normalizes heterosexuality, I argue that it is just one moment of many through which American culture "helps to socialize women during several decades of their lives."²⁶ Not that socialization does not occur in America's young men as well, but one must probe the natures of those socializations and the ways in which they lead to gender inequality. Specifically, McCracken states that magazines' focus on "cosmetics, fashion, food preparation, and romance...prepare girls for their future roles as wives and mothers."²⁷ Implied, therefore, is a constant awareness of the male gaze. The ways in which this contributes to girls' magazines' promotion of the fairytale paradigm is a key question in this section.

One striking example of this theme is the *Tiger-Beat* (December 2012) article "Which Twilight Hottie Would Come to Your Rescue?" Adopting the standard quiz form, the quiz poses a series of questions, all but one of which center on "your crush." Here, of course, the experiences of non-heterosexual girls are marginalized with the assumption that the reader

²⁵ McCracken, *Decoding Women's Magazines*, 138.

²⁶ McCracken, *Decoding Women's Magazines*, 137.

²⁷ McCracken, *Decoding Women's Magazines*, 137.

would be “crushing” on a particular male in her life.²⁸ The premise of the article, moreover, is very much indicative of the fairytale paradigm in its antiquated suggestion of the need for females to be rescued. The contradictory nature of girls’ magazines is revealed here through the presence of an article that conveys a sense of female powerlessness in the context of a genre that espouses girl power.²⁹ Once the reader discovers who her “hottie rescuer” would be, the paradigm is solidified through phrases like, “[Edward Cullen] would do anything to protect you and make you happy. After all, you are everything to him!,” “[Jacob Black] would turn into his massive werewolf form to fight off monsters for you any day,” and “[Emmett Cullen] would rescue you from any danger.”³⁰ Interestingly, however, I talked about this article in-depth with girls through my activist research at the Boys and Girls Club. The girls at LaSalle Elementary had strong opinions, both positive and negative, about the quiz, opinions that I will discuss in depth in Chapter 2.

M’s December 2012 issue also includes an example of the fairytale paradigm through the quiz “Do you follow your head or your heart?” Under the pretense of diagnosing the reader’s style of “crushing,” the quiz implies that there is (or should be) some guy on your mind. Indeed, the issue of “your crush” or future boyfriend is such a high priority that it is a constant struggle to mediate between the “head” or the “heart” in order to make sense of one’s feelings. Furthermore, the ability to discern between “marriageable” and “un-marriageable” men by using one’s head or heart is a quality upon which girls are still judged. If a relationship fails, often it is the woman who “should have known better.” In reality, the ability to keenly discern a male’s character could unfortunately mean the difference between safety and constant imminent danger for a woman in the case of a violent relationship. Therefore, behind the “romance” and levity of the quiz lurks the real risk of not using one’s

²⁸ Currie, *Girl Talk*, 47.

²⁹ Currie, *Girl Talk*, 112.

³⁰ “Which Twilight Hottie Would Come to Your Rescue?,” *Tiger-Beat*, December 2012, 32.

“head” to eliminate bad crushes chosen via the heart from one’s life before they become abusive husbands or partners.

Not surprisingly, the fairytale paradigm persists into the young teen magazine, particularly *Girls’ Life’s* (October/November 2012) “The Six Sneaky Secrets of Playing Hard to Get.” In line with Currie’s conclusions about the fact that much of the content of girls’ magazines centers on the search to better understand boys (more specifically readers’ “crushes”), this article outlines various rules and guidelines to abide by when “scheming to snag that sweetie.”³¹ The goal of the article has the pursuit of a boyfriend as its focus, but at the same time places an extra duty on the girl- that she not only find a boyfriend, but do so in a way in which she appears to not really be trying. Also fitting with the theme of self-surveillance, the article advises such minute regulation of behavior as closely monitoring your texting/non-texting patterns with the boy, carefully toeing the line between “mysterious” and “sweet,” and exercising deliberate passiveness to create interest. Though the word “playing” in the title of the article alludes to games and jocularly, the extent to which the article normalizes and specifies the need to pursue a boyfriend indicates that this is a topic girls should not take light-heartedly. In addition, another essential part of the cult of girlhood is learning to distrust female friends, all who are posited as potential enemies, or “frenemies.”

A Suspicion of Female Relationships

Through the various articles analyzed, girls are socialized to participate in the trope of the “mean girl” by always remaining suspicious and exclusive in their friend groups. Friendship, undoubtedly, is a valuable concept to promote. Some of the articles do create fun activities and foster good friendships between girls, but the far majority are concerned with undermining relationships and suggesting deceit between friends.

³¹ Currie, *Girl Talk*, 188.

The suspicion of female relationships finds its manifestations in articles like *Bop!*'s "Which clique are you?" Here the line is blurred between friendship and its evil twin: the clique. This article asks six questions of its readers to determine if they belong in "The Sweet Girls," "The Funny Girls," or "The Edgy Girls." Separating and distinguishing girls from one another in an arbitrary way undoubtedly plays into stereotypes about "mean girls" and "queen bees." Perpetuating ideas about girls as forming exclusive cliques may instigate or worsen friendship tensions. It also reaffirms ideas about the "natural" inclinations of girls to gossip or be "catty," as opposed to the more affable friendships that the media stereotypically portrays males as enjoying. The quiz also uses the term "BFF," an acronym referencing "best friend forever" that also serves to add exclusivity and competition to female friendships. Furthermore, a notion of race is at play here, as the only girl of color portrayed is Rihanna, in "The Edgy Girls" category, a group by nature that is seen as "other." In this way, the quiz privileges whiteness by classifying the white girls in the "mainstream" cliques while marginalizing and stereotyping girls of color into the alternative and rebellious clique.

Another quiz focuses on friendship and also takes a decidedly negative stance. In "Does Your BFF Have Your Back?," it is suggested to girls that they question their friends' integrity and loyalty. Again, this plays into the media hype associated with the movie *Mean Girls* (2004) and fosters anxiety with regard to friendship, because it focuses on a single "BFF," related to the need to find (and keep) a single best friend. The first quiz question asks, "Your BFF is throwing a big party. She tells you: a) Last minute b) Before anyone else." In this way, by putting forth an arbitrary and obsessive level of friendship as the ideal, quizzes and other similar articles undermine healthy female-to-female relationships at a young age.

As the magazines progress in target age, however, this theme grows more blatant. In *Girls' Life* (October/November 2012), the article "Straight Up Witchy" does not keep hidden its references to the character that it labels the "frenemy." By posing hypothetical situations

followed by advice, it disallows thinking of a girl with whom the reader does not get along with any degree of positivity. The introduction to the article, moreover, casts her as a kind of monster: “Handling a frightful frenemy is never a treat. Seven tricks to deal with her horrifying behavior.”³² The article also serves to impose other negative characteristics and qualities on “the frenemy” that the reader may not have encountered but may perhaps then associate with the girl who she sees as a “frenemy.” These condemned actions range from competitions over “crushes” and “besties” to starting rumors and telling secrets. The term “frenemy,” moreover, implies that this girl could be anyone, even those girls you may see as your friends. Therefore, as a whole, female relationships are portrayed negatively, or at least as a very distinct, competitive, backstabbing, and exclusive notion as compared to a similar concept of “brotherhood.” These disparate representations of friendship undoubtedly play into the resurgence of ideas about natural sexual difference. While men and boys in contemporary media often support and look out for one another, women and girls are often portrayed as (literally) at each others’ throats over boys, popularity, or beauty. This comparison is hardly accurate or equitable. Also unjust is the depiction, or lack thereof, of minority girls in girls’ magazines, and the ways in which this creates invisible norms that function to normalize whiteness, heterosexuality, and middle class-ness.

The Assumed Subject of Girl Power Culture

Rosalind Gill, in an article concerned with addressing the rhetoric of empowerment and discussions about the “sexualization of culture,” states that, with regard to the “13-year-old girl” often referenced in these arenas, she wants to “raise some critical questions about her assumed whiteness, middle-class-ness, able-bodiedness, U.S.-Anglo status, and

³² Leal, Samantha, “Straight Up Witchy,” *Girls’ Life*, October/November 2012.

heterosexuality.”³³ Indeed, all of the magazines examined center on this figure. Currie cites Patricia Hill Collins in her beliefs about the relationship between race and representations of “beauty” in American culture. “...the issue of beauty- particularly skin colour, facial features, and hair texture- is a concrete example of how dominant cultural representations continue to devalue African-American women.”³⁴ Indeed, the number of images of women of color found in the magazines could be counted on two hands. Furthermore, the non-heterosexual experience is completely muted and the extent to which the magazines promote consumerism implies a readership with an income sufficient to spend on beauty and fashion. Furthermore, though some of the magazines allow space for individual self-expression, themes of middle-class propriety pervade throughout.

Though representations of these minority groups are not found, the fact that their lack creates cultural norms is more important. The invisibility of privilege is what lends it power, and girls’ magazines’ ability to do this through the cult of girlhood and its assumptions about the nature of the girl reading them means that hegemonic media structures continue to ignore the realities of a variety of lived girlhood experiences.

Conclusion

As is shown through close textual analysis, elements of the cult of girlhood can be seen clearly in pre- and young teen girls’ magazines. More specifically, I have elucidated evidence through articles that reify neoliberalism and individual empowerment, postfeminism and girl power rhetoric, celebrities and consumerism, self-surveillance, the fairytale paradigm, a suspicion of female relationships, and the assumption of a white, middle-class, heterosexual subject. Although I have strived to be as comprehensive as possible here, there undoubtedly remains much more to be explored with regard to these topics. Indeed, Currie

³³ Gill, “Media, Empowerment, and the ‘Sexualization of Culture’ Debates,” 737.

³⁴ McCracken, *Decoding Women’s Magazines*, 39.

says that, "...we are only just beginning to unravel the complexities of the relationship between patriarchal culture and our embodiment as 'women.'" More analysis of influences which come during girlhood, therefore, will be crucial to understanding patriarchy's effects at every age.

Chapter Two: A Sociological Approach

A discussion of the cult of girlhood and its relevance to twenty-first century American culture also needs an analysis of the way in which it manifests itself in the lives of actual girls. Therefore, here I explore how girls link and relate magazine content to their own lives. This sociological approach grounds theories about how girl power media culture relates to postfeminism and neoliberalism in primary data with real girls, namely showing the ways in which the cult of girlhood found via textual analysis in many ways ignores “girls’ economic, political, and social realities,” evidenced in the girls’ resistant identities, ideas, and opinions.¹ What results is an understanding of media and personal reality that takes into account the “need to move away from the view of the media as a totalizing monolith to understand the different ways young people engage with diverse features of the mediascapes in which we all live.”² Speaking with girls themselves, therefore, complicates findings from chapter 1. Indeed, my research data reveals positive conclusions about the ways that girls think about magazines, themselves, and the status of gender equality. The degree to which girls articulated resistance to the cult of girlhood and identified with feminism far exceeded my expectations. However, the ways in which the cult of girlhood and its ideologies of postfeminism and neoliberalism, rhetoric of girl power and individual empowerment, and powerful normative standards cannot be fully escaped, is a sobering reality.

¹ Emilie Zaslow, *Feminism, Inc.: Coming of Age in Girl Power Media Culture* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 7.

² Rosalind Gill, “Media, Empowerment, and the ‘Sexualization of Culture’ Debates,” *Sex Roles* 66 (2012): 739.

SMART Girls Methodology

I achieved this avenue of primary research with girls through work at two local Boys and Girls Club locations, LaSalle Elementary and Battell Elementary. The Boys and Girls Club was looking for someone to implement their SMART Girls Program; this venue became the springboard through which I was able to also carry out my research. The program ultimately consisted of eight 45-minute sessions at LaSalle and six 45-minute sessions at Battell, during which I led various group activities, facilitated the girls' journaling, and conducted focus group discussions, one-on-one interviews, and participant observation.

My research goals shaped the activities and discussions of each SMART Girls session. At first, I was primarily interested in grounding my critical analysis of the magazines with supplemental knowledge about the girls who read them. I sought to answer questions such as: Are they even reading magazines? If so, which ones do they find interesting, and what parts do they read? How do they identify with magazines and understand the various messages, both implicit and explicit, put forth through them? Later, as the girls opened up to me further, I was surprised and pleased at other comments and discussions that occurred. These comments centered on gender inequality, the general experience of being a pre-teen girl, and ideas about solutions to various problems and struggles. Therefore, my research goals bloomed into a further inquiry about the ways that girls understand "girl power" and its manifestations (or lack thereof) in their own capabilities for achievement. As they spoke and wrote to me about their thoughts on this matter, I filtered them through my own understanding of feminism as advocacy for radical social and political change to end sexist oppression to determine if the girls articulated support for feminism on a basic level. Finally, I asked questions about and explored with the girls their identities and interests, confidence levels, and personal goals.

Anxieties and Limitations

The SMART Girls sessions were indeed carried out with some anxiety regarding the effectiveness of my activities and their relevance to my research goals. For one, although I was free to plan and conduct the sessions at my discretion, I was always conscious of the context I was working in. Namely, the fact that, according to the Boys and Girls Club of America website, the SMART Girls program was originally intended to “encourage healthy attitudes and lifestyles that will enable early adolescent girls to develop to their full potential.” For that reason, I attempted to include practical activities and sessions in which I fulfilled those goals while also making time for activities that would pertain to my research questions.

Another fear was that the sessions would in many ways perpetuate the kinds of activities and ideologies that I aimed to critique. For example, the session during which the girls planned out goals for themselves was reminiscent of the ways that postfeminist culture sees girls as part of the “neoliberal project” in which “human life comes increasingly to be conceived in primarily entrepreneurial terms where individuals are responsible for their own adaptation and progress.”³ Furthermore, I later came to understand the session during which they made collages from the magazines as problematic because it did not make room for the use of other types of magazines besides the ones I brought (the titles analyzed in the previous chapter). One participant even wrote in her journal about the activity, “Somethings [sic] that I would put in my collage if I had more time would be pictures of my family.”

Additionally, I agree with Rosalind Gill’s claim about the ways in which “media literacy” activities place further expectations on girls to navigate postfeminist culture, when the impetus should ideally be placed on institutional bodies and structures to reform their

³ Joanne Baker, “Claiming Volition and Evading Victimhood: Post-Feminist Obligations for Young Women,” *Feminism & Psychology* 20.2 (2010): 187.

depictions of females.⁴ My findings and conclusions were also limited by vacillations in attendance and commitment to the program. Some girls could only participate in a few activities, and some only for partial sessions.

Assessment of Program Effectiveness

Within these limits, however, I do believe that my execution of the SMART Girls program (as re-structured to fit my research goals) was effective for the Boys and Girls Club, enjoyable for the girls, and fruitful for the purposes of my thesis project. I was especially pleased at some of the latter sessions, during which the girls began to ask me personal questions and for advice in their journals and in person. I made copies of these anonymous questions and gave them to the girls, who were interested and intrigued by them and my responses. This proved to me that my project provided a forum for questions that they were not having answered elsewhere, a facet of the program that I found to be quite valuable. Furthermore, the fact that this weekly three quarters of an hour was devoted completely to the girls, their thoughts, and their questions, was significant. Hopefully, this communicated to the girls that their experiences and opinions mattered and could be shared freely in this space.

An achievement of the program that was both tangible and positive was the culmination of the sessions in a field trip to a Notre Dame women's basketball game. Various times throughout the sessions, the girls brought up the Notre Dame women's basketball team as role models and young women to look up to, so I thought it would be extremely exciting for them to attend a practice or one of the games. Through contact with the team's community service manager, we arranged for all of the girls and some of the Boys and Girls Club staff to have free tickets to the senior game against Syracuse on February 26, 2013. I shared the girls' excitement about this event. They arrived an hour prior to the game, and

⁴ Gill, "Media, Empowerment, and the 'Sexualization of Culture' Debates," 736-745.

during this time I also took them to see the cheerleaders, my teammates, warming up for the game. During the game (a Notre Dame comeback victory), the girls held signs, danced to music, bought souvenirs and snacks, and screamed their lungs out in support of the Irish. Although the game lasted until after 9:00 pm, they still had enough energy to wait outside the team's locker room and get several autographs from the players after the game. The basketball game was an ideal way to end the SMART Girls program, bringing both groups together for a relaxing, fun, and informal evening where the girls could meet some of their ultimate role models. Photographs from the night can be found in Appendix B.

The bulk of the SMART Girls program took place over the course of the academic year 2012-2013 during the months of late October to late February, omitting parts of December and January for winter break. During the first semester, I visited LaSalle Elementary each Tuesday from 4:00 pm- 4:45 pm and Battell Elementary on Thursdays during the same time period. During the second semester I held sessions biweekly, visiting the sites each Monday from 4:00 pm- 4:45 pm but alternating locations each week. Generally, we remained close to the predetermined schedule. The Battell site got off to a later start but eventually caught up as I eliminated activities I found to be less useful.

The number of participants in the program varied from week to week, but in total I worked with thirty-three girls, though the more regular number of girls hovered closer to thirty. The LaSalle site had attendance of between thirteen and sixteen girls each session, ranging in age from ten to twelve and in grades fifth and sixth. The Battell site was a bit larger, running closer to seventeen girls each session due to the fact that it included a larger span of ages (nine to twelve). Out of the roughly thirty girls, six (20%) were members of a minority race. Due to fluctuations in attendance, each girl did not participate in every activity. The following table gives an overview of the primary data from which my conclusions draw.

Type of primary source	Number of participants
Introductory survey	14
Journal	25
Collage	27
Zine	33
Personal Interview	13

To produce these sources, each session was structured with the following categories: topic, question, activity, output, and evaluation. The topic for the day was the general themes to be explored, and the question was the prompt for the activity. The output was defined as what I hoped to find or discover as a result of the session, and the evaluation category refers to the tangible means or objects through which I would ascertain the output. Also, for clarification, the sessions were not classified necessarily sequentially, but by topic. That is, “Session 1” was conducted at LaSalle on October 23, whereas it was held at Battell on November 15. Also of note is that Session 2 (goal-setting), Session 4 (media literacy with Twilight quiz), and Session 5 (peer relationships) were eliminated from the Battell site for the sake of time constraints. Instead, Session 3 (which I ended up finding more valuable) was split into two sessions, 3a and 3b. The full calendar detailing the sessions and activities is found in Appendix C.

Each session began with an explanation of what we would be doing that day. Then, I would initiate dialogue with the girls by asking informal questions about their lives, upcoming holidays, or how their days were going. After that, each session varied slightly, though it usually consisted of several of the following activities: a group activity or conversation focused on one topic, an individual craft or activity, a journal prompt, a partner

activity, or individual conversations with me. After the forty-five minutes were over, they would return all materials and I would collect them for analysis.

Through these sessions, I formed conclusions about the ways in which girls actually do identify with the continued need for feminism and for social and structural change. On the other hand, many of their responses fall under the scope of the ideologies, rhetoric, and norms of the cult of girlhood and are therefore indicative of the ways in which it infiltrates and manifests itself in the lives of girls themselves.

Findings in Accordance with the Cult of Girlhood

Ideologies: Postfeminism and Neoliberalism

The first way in which my findings reveal consistencies with the cult of girlhood is through adherence to the ideologies of postfeminism and neoliberalism. Though the girls do not have understandings of these complex topics, their use and prevalence of language and ideas that are indicative of these themes is striking. For example, in discussing their Halloween costumes, several girls mentioned costumes that closely match Gill's idea of a postfeminist culture in which "prefeminist ideals are being (seductively) repackaged as postfeminist freedoms."⁵ Through this rhetoric of "choosing" to conform to the male gaze, social structures of power are hidden. "Choice" and its relation to feminism is complex, but McRobbie states it clearly when she says that the rhetoric of choice sends a message to girls that we are, "beyond feminism, to a more comfortable zone where women are now free to choose for themselves."⁶ In my research group, I found that many girls fell into this

⁵ Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10.2 (2007): 23.

⁶ Angela McRobbie, "Chapter 1: Notes on Postfeminism and Popular Culture: Bridget Jones and the New Gender Regime," in *All About the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity*, ed. Anita Harris (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 8.

phenomenon when they told me that they went trick-or-treating as cats (which they described as “playful”) or “Draculora” (pictured), a doll from Mattel’s “Monster High” line.



Figure 1: Draculora

Draculora is a postfeminist character. In addition to the pink color of the dress, hair, and shoes, the character’s physical features exude traditional femininity: long, thick hair with highlights, bangs, and ponytails; a slim waist and long thin legs; full lips; large, wide-set, long-lashed eyes, and manicured nails. The fashion exemplified here through a tulle miniskirt, frilly top, and knee-high, lace-up, high-heeled boots is also representative of a sexualized girliness. Lastly, the character’s body posture shows passivity and sexuality with a sly smile, finger to the cheek, knees turned inward, and cocked head. This Halloween costume in particular is an example of how girls’ lives often align with media images and rhetoric. The character of Draculora falls quite close to what McRobbie would say are “prefeminist ideals,” that is, creating images in which women and girls are portrayed in a trivialized, sexualized, idealized, and objectified manner.

Furthermore, neoliberalism, through its “preoccupation with the self as independent and self-defining rather than as a product of social and cultural discourses and practices,” can be found in the ways that girls talk about future success in life.⁷ Rather than being able to speak about the ways in which girls are “still disadvantaged...by a male dominant society,”

⁷ Baker, “Claiming Volition and Evading Victimhood,” 190.

they use rhetoric that is similar to what Baker describes as “demonizing dependence,” where there is “an illusory sense of autonomy [and] personal responsibility for avoiding vulnerability and extensive self-surveillance.”⁸ In what they have learned through the SMART Girls program, girls write statements such as, “I have learned that you should always make smart choices in life,” “I have learned that you should make goals in your life and never be mean to one another and to try to reach your goals instead of not even trying.” Although some of these statements may unavoidably stem from the fact that goal setting was part of the SMART Girls sessions, many other issues were discussed apart from pursuing goals and making choices, and the girls could have noted those themes as “what they learned” instead or in addition to goal setting.

Rhetoric: Girl Power and Individual Empowerment

The second way the cult of girlhood can be seen is through use of the rhetoric of girl power and individual empowerment, revealed through my interactions with the girls. Several girls make comments in their zines (an activity that occupied sessions 6-8) that one of the three best things about being a girl is that girls are “Better than boys! WE ARE! IT’S TRUE!” Another girl said, “It’s scientifically proven that girls mature faster than boys. They’ll still be playing with Legos while you’re planning your career.” When I referenced the concept of girl power at one point, one participant even stated, “I know what girl power is! That’s what I say to boys when we play dodge-ball and I get a boy out, I say ‘Girl Power!’” The location in which many girls articulate their conceptions of girl power was in their zines. They make statements such as, “Now, it’s a good thing to be a girl! It is so fun! It is awesome... Don’t feel bad! It’s cool to be a girl! Gurl [sic] on fire!!” and “This is a girl thing, so if you are a boy, go put this down and go play some video games!” Clearly, the

⁸ Baker, “Claiming Volition and Evading Victimhood,” 187.

notion of “girl power” is not a concept that the girls are unfamiliar with, though their conceptions of girl power are decidedly neoliberal and individualistic. Rather than being notions that truly relate to educational, social, and political empowerment, the only statements girls have to choose from center on mere claims of superiority, a tactic that in many ways mimics what popular media does itself.

Therefore, the typical (neoliberal) response to a lack “girl power” is most likely a call to individual empowerment. For example, a participant stated in her zine: “Don’t let people tell you what to be or who to be. Always where [sic] what you want to were [sic].” Another girl says, “Dear Readers, It is kind of hard being a girl. Here is a tip: if a boy is making fun of you walk away. Boys can be harsh.” Here it is clear that girls see harassment as an issue to be handled via their own personal choices. This also translates to the more serious issue of domestic violence. One participant spoke to me about watching *The Jerry Springer Show* with her mother, who inculcated in her the following advice: “[My mom] told me that the women had to do what men said or else they’d be beaten,” also telling her that women should be “stronger.” Even more concerning was the girl’s fears (and recounting) of domestic violence in her own home and the ways in which this message of male control could take root. Alternatively, however, in a situation in which males exercise control through physical violence, an obedient stance in which females survive by enduring harsh treatment could in reality be the only “choice” for this young girl, though it really is no a choice at all.

Characteristics: Consumerism and Celebrities

Another manifestation of the cult of girlhood is an obsession with consumerism and celebrities. Indeed, according to Duke and Kreshel’s 1998 study of teen magazines, the top four topics covered in American teen magazines at the time were 1) fashion 2) feature articles

3) beauty, and 4) entertainment.⁹ Although the second-ranked topic, “feature articles,” is ambiguous, the others pertain quite closely to consumer habits through the purchase of fashionable clothing and accessories, cosmetics, and media. This relates to the way in which Christine Griffin says that the media sees girls primarily as “consuming subjects and objects of consumption” and defines “girl power” as “fundamentally about the power of the girl as consumer.”¹⁰ Banet-Weiser confirms this statement when she adds that today, “empowerment” really refers to “media visibility” and one’s stance as part of a lucrative “market demographic.”¹¹ From my research with the girls at the Boys and Girls Club, it is evident that girls understand themselves as serving as part of this cultural role.

For example, during one of the sessions I asked the girls if they had any questions they wanted to ask me anonymously. One of the questions they wrote to me was as follows:

So my problem is that people have all of the “cool” cloths [sic] that have name brands or what ever. The problem, I don’t!!!! I have the cloths [sic] from Walmart and Meijer and other stores that aren’t name brands. I feel left out!!! People have all of the North Face jackets, Aeropostale , and Hollister and Uggs and whatever! What do I do??!

With this statement, it is clear that many of the girls understand brand significance as well as the consumer power that is socially attached to them. Part of “fitting in” is assumed to be buying the right brands and displaying one’s fashion choices. Duke and Kreshel also came to this conclusion when they say that part of their findings revealed the importance of brands as a “status signifier.”¹²

⁹ Lisa L. Duke and Peggy J. Kreshel, “Negotiating Femininity: Girls in Early Adolescence Read Teen Magazines,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 22 (1998): 53.

¹⁰ Christine Griffin, “Chapter 3: Good Girls, Bad Girls: Anglocentrism and Diversity in the Constitution of Contemporary Girlhood,” in *All About the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity*, ed. Anita Harris (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 35.

¹¹ Sarah Banet-Weiser, “Chapter 8: What’s Your Flava? Race and Postfeminism in Media Culture,” in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, ed. Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 216.

¹² Duke and Kreshel, “Negotiating Femininity,” 65.

Furthermore, when I asked what were, in their opinion, the best things about being a girl, participants answered, “You can go buy a lot of stuff,” “Going shopping with friends [sic],” and “shopping.” What is truly problematic about the focus on consumerism is the ways in which it has led to a “commodified version of feminist ideas and values.”¹³ As was noted in chapter 1 with the article that implied confidence could be bought through purchase of one’s “confidence color,” more often than not, consumerism is framed in the media as a site of women’s and girls’ power. Duke and Kreshel elucidate further the ways that consumerism repackaged as empowerment is disingenuous because of its relation to the expectation of policing one’s body to adhere to the male gaze. They say, “Dissected into physical parts- eyes, lips, breasts, legs- women constantly are made aware of chronic imperfections, then offered products that will help them attain the socially constructed ideal... Thus, we produce our feminine identity through the consumption of commodities.”¹⁴ Clearly, as the girls’ understandings of the “good” parts about being a girl reveal, this expectation is inculcated at an early age.

The effects of magazines’ celebrity-saturated content is also made known through the girls’ words and actions. They decorate their folders, zines, and papers with doodles and texts that say “One Direction” and include the names of all the members of the British boy band. Some of their future goals include marriage to the band members, and they write about the ways in which they identify with the male pop stars as their role models. About Justin Bieber, one participant says, “He has a good influence on me. He shows me you can achieve anything you want to...I look up to him.”

One SMART Girls activity was making collages from the magazines analyzed in Chapter 1. The directions I gave were to put together a collage that displayed the things in the magazines that interested or appealed to them. Twenty-seven girls participated. After

¹³ Banet-Weiser, “What’s Your Flava?,” 223.

¹⁴ Duke and Kreshel, “Negotiating Femininity,” 49-50.

analyzing a total of 305 images used and placing them into several classifications, the two largest categories were “male celebrities” and “female celebrities” with 148 images and 63 images, respectively. Therefore, over 50% of the images chosen by the girls were images of celebrities, the far majority of them pictures of male celebrities. Though one of the more extreme examples, the following collage is not an uncommon representation of the ways in which girls fashioned their collages as shrines to male celebrities.



Figure 2: Male Celebrity Collage

This evidence, paired with statements that make clear their idolization of male celebrities, leads me to conclude that the celebrification of teen magazines does the cultural work of placing girls under the male gaze, teaching them to listen to and value the voices of the male celebrities they are infatuated with. Duke and Kreshel come to the same conclusions

in their similar study of how girls read magazines, saying that, “The first finding is that girls relied heavily on the reports of boys’ voices, regularly featured in their magazines, for counsel on how to attain male approval and negotiate girls’ roles in romantic relationships.”¹⁵

Normative Work

Partly a result of operating under the male gaze, many of the normative symptoms of the cult of girlhood can be found in the girls’ comments, journal entries, and creative activities. Though all of the norms were found to some extent, the one most salient and prevalent was self-surveillance. With regard to the other three norms, I largely found significant resistance from the girls to the ways in which the norms are supposedly written into their lives. Resistance will be discussed in the next section. A suspicion of female relationships was manifested at times through obvious social tensions between the girls, but my encounters with this symptom were minor. With regard to the white, middle-class, heterosexual subject, I found it difficult to tease out how this norm would manifest itself in the girls’ comments and writing. Perhaps it is its very lack in conversation and discourse that characterizes it most aptly. Its invisibility as a norm is what lends it power, and the absence of the girls’ comments with regard to the ways in which white, middle-class, heterosexual privilege is reinforced makes the need for its critique even more relevant.

Because the cult of girlhood’s primary relevance is to norms created through magazines, I did not see the need to draw out and elucidate the cult of girlhood comprehensively in the recounting of my sociological findings here. Rather, the norm that most applies is a focus on self-surveillance of behavior and appearance. Although self-surveillance prevails throughout the magazines with regard to appearance, in the sociological component during which I interacted with the girls it was especially seen in relation to

¹⁵ Duke and Kreshel, “Negotiating Femininity,” 57.

regulation of one's behavior. These behavioral norms center on "being yourself," "being kind/nice," and "being positive/ having a good attitude." In a total count of these kind of statements in the primary sources, there were a total of seven that refer to the importance of "being myself," eight that emphasize "being positive/having a good attitude," and twenty-three that indicate girls should be "kind" or "nice." This data was peculiar, as at no point during the sessions did I place a focus on "being nice" or having an optimistic attitude. In the session during which I talked to the girls about ideal qualities of a "SMART girl," rather than talking about "niceness," I consciously focused on qualities such as bravery, confidence, curiosity, trustworthiness, independence, and creativity.

Most of the aforementioned responses occurred in journal entries where girls were prompted to respond to the question, "What have you learned in SMART Girls thus far? What does it mean to be a SMART Girl?" Considering they answered this question after the activity during which we talked about the qualities of a SMART girl, I assumed they would write about those I had chosen to emphasize. The fact that the majority of girls reference "being yourself," "being nice," and "being positive," therefore, could be indicative of an external expectation whose rhetoric they are regurgitating. Duke and Kreshel identify this moment in early adolescence and describe the same phenomenon as cited by another study:

At the crucial milestone of early adolescence, Brown and Gilligan (1992) reported that girls began to censor what they thought and felt with a voice that originated in social authorities such as parents and teachers but that girls often failed to distinguish from their own.¹⁶

Duke furthers this statement through articulating the specific messages that "social authorities" take on: "Girls learn that the right look and being "nice" are vital to acceptance by others."¹⁷ In the same way, the rhetoric of "being yourself" is also a contradictory phrase. Duke and Kreshel say that, "The female body, now dissected and commodified, becomes

¹⁶ Duke and Kreshel, "Negotiating Femininity," 50.

¹⁷ Lisa Duke, "Black in a Blonde World: Race and Girls' Interpretations of the Feminine Ideal in Teen Magazines," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 77 (2000): 373.

something in need of constant reparation and transformation- all of this while simultaneously encouraging girls to ‘be themselves.’”¹⁸ They are concerned with exploring how girls deal with this discrepancy, and I too was interested in resolving this inconsistency.

The fact that the language of “be yourself” is paired with rhetoric about “being nice” leads to the conclusion that girls learn that the only acceptable version of themselves is that which conforms to the cult of girlhood and its expectation of self-surveillance of behavior. This is shown through the voices and words of the girls who in many cases say that the part of their “self” they want to “work on” the most is that which pertains to “niceness.”

[What I learned in SMART Girls is]

-That you should ALWAYS be nice.

-I learned that you should always listen to anyone that is talking, being nice, and having fun!

[What I sometimes don’t like about myself is that]

-I am not always...being nice to others.

-I’m mean.

-Sometimes I’m mean!!

[What I want to work on is]

-Work on being nicer- Make more friends.

-I need to work on being social. I get scared to talk to people I don’t know.

-I need to work on my niceness. And do what I’m told and don’t have anaditute [sic] with everyone.

-Next week I’m going to be a lot nicer.

Other comments girls make about behavior in general solidifies the focus on behavioral self-surveillance. One participant idolizes Victoria Justice because “She’s not afraid to do weird and crazy stuff in front of people,” through this statement implying that she herself is afraid to do those things because of social repercussions. Similarly, one girl did not like about herself that “I like some boy shows that are more for seven and eight year olds.” In this way, even choice of media consumption is mediated through surveillance. It was also stated that it is hard to be a girl because to be a girl requires “good manners.” Through these statements, consolidated from a variety of the primary sources from a number of different

¹⁸ Duke and Kreshel, “Negotiating Femininity,” 64.

girls, it can be implied that self-surveillance of behavior is a norm that is not only perpetuated through magazines, but is also found in the ideas and self-conceptions of girls themselves.

In addition to regulation of behavior, the norm of preoccupation with managing one's physical image is revealed through the girls' statements. They say that part of being a girl is "smiling," a behavior and symbol of "niceness" that also relates to appearance. An awareness of others' evaluations of their appearances is demonstrated when one girl said that the thing she does not like about herself is that "I'm fat," another said "my insecurity," and a third said, "I need braces." A recognition of the ways in which performing gender requires extra work on behalf of the female to modify appearances is demonstrated when one girl wrote that the things that were hard about being a girl were, "1. Brusung [sic] my hair 2. Wasing [sic] my hair and picking my cloths [sic]." Being a girl, therefore, normalizes physical and behavioral self-surveillance as part of the cult of girlhood.

Findings of Resistance

A discussion of magazines and postfeminist media culture in general and their promulgation of the cult of girlhood, however, should not be seen in isolation from the experiences of girls themselves and the ways they understand media texts. Stuart Hall's key text "Encoding, Decoding" describes the ways in which producers "encode" texts with messages that are subsequently "decoded" by "receivers."¹⁹ Specifically, receivers can take three "hypothetical positions" regarding the text- a "dominant-hegemonic" reading, a "negotiated" understanding, or a "globally contrary" conception of the text's meaning.

Furthermore, in her book *Reading the Romance*, Janice Radway helps us understand the tension between academic scholars' critical interpretations and the ways in which the "everywoman" understands the meaning of romance novels. She reaches conclusions about

¹⁹ Stuart Hall, *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse*, vol. 7, (University of Birmingham: Centre for Cultural Studies, 1973), 510.

the value of taking readership intent and voices into account, saying that to do otherwise is to “petrify the human act of signification, to ignore the fact that comprehension is actually a process of making meaning, a process where the reader actively attributes significance to signifiers on the basis of previously learned cultural codes.”²⁰ In this case, I argue that cultural codes relate to the girlhood cultures girls experience in their homes, families, and other intimate environments. Duke echoes this message in concluding that, “The degree to which teens are affected by media is largely determined by the relevance of the message and whether the behavior or belief advocated is useful and socially appropriate.”²¹ Rosalind Gill also stresses the importance of situating analysis in local contexts, emphasizing the need to research girls as “engaged social actors embedded in family, friendship, school, and many other networks.”²² In interviewing the girls carefully about magazines, it is clear that many enter the dialogue with clear preferences and biases as to what the images mean based on values learned in these local spaces.

One theme I found in girls’ interpretations was the pattern of adopting conservative values with regard to female behavior and appearance. Several girls in particular voiced strong opinions about models and celebrities in magazines that deviated from modest, subdued appearances. Interestingly, two mentioned Miley Cyrus as a young woman who is “not someone I look up to...I used to want blonder hair but now I don’t...She’s not modest and wears too much makeup and not enough clothes.” They criticized girls in the magazines that wear “tons of makeup and wacky clothes,” saying, “That’s not me. I don’t have time to make myself all prettied up. I’m pretty the way I am. I only care what people think of my personality.”

²⁰ Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 7.

²¹ Duke, “Black in a Blonde World,” 372.

²² Gill, “Media, Empowerment, and the Sexualization of Culture Debates,” 739.

One girl gasped aloud when she saw a picture of a crop top covering only the model's breasts and expressed repulsion. Another interviewee, when asked what she thought of the clothes in magazines told me that, "If they're stupid shirts that go up to here [gestures above her below button] then no, they're disgusting. Also the ones that cut 'V's." These type of comments were not uncommon, perhaps the most vehement of the bunch being, "If a piece of clothing is inappropriate, I'd immediately shut [the magazine] because I don't like that kind of stuff and I'd have to wait a minute [shakes her head and frowns]." Demonstrated through the girls' comments voicing disapproval of model and celebrities' "immodest" appearances, it is clear that girls' understandings of the texts differ significantly from that of scholars' interpretations or producers' "encodings." Specifically, a typical critical reading of the text would most likely claim that magazines exercise a hegemonic position over readers and influence them to mimic sexualized images of females. In this case, however, girls read these encodings as repulsive.

A second theme indicating alternative understandings of magazines is one that resounds with Duke's conclusions about how girls of color negotiate being "black in a blonde world" and understand "the feminine ideal in teen magazines." Although I worked with several girls of color, the input of one African-American girl in particular stood out as representative of the relevance of incorporating race and ethnicity into understanding girls' interpretations of text.²³ As expressed by Duke, "Black girls indicated that their beauty is based in "attitude and style" whereas White girls in the same study believed their attractiveness was judged in large part by how thin they were," also emphasizing the effects that supportive family members and close friends have in fostering this ideal.²⁴ Comments made by my research participant confirmed these ideologies.

²³ Duke, "Black in a Blonde World," 372.

²⁴ Duke, "Black in a Blonde World," 373.

When asked how reading magazines makes her feel, my research participant said, “Annoyed, because sometimes they say you’re the opposite of what you really are, but they’re wrong, cause I’m [girl’s own name]!” This underlying belief in one’s self-worth apart from appearances is demonstrated through other comments such as when she says one of her skills is “being awesome.” When writing about women she looks up to, she cites Beyoncé and Michelle Obama. She expresses that the reasons she admires them are because they are “flawless” and “awesome.” Interestingly, on the very next page, rather than comparing herself to them in an inferior way, she writes, “I’m awesome. I’m cute. I’m flawless.” Her future goals for herself are ambitious as well. She says her plans are to “Don’t have kids until 25 or 30. Be a forensic specialist. Have a huge house.” In further support of Duke’s claims, another one of the African-American girls stated that the thing she doesn’t like about herself was that “I get headaches,” as opposed to the items white girls listed, such as body parts or confidence problems.

Perhaps the most interesting component of my findings about girls’ understanding of magazines, girl power, and themselves was the girls’ articulations of feminism and dissatisfaction with the status quo of gender inequality. These findings, though lacking the necessary structural and institutional support to beget change, are revealing and yield optimism in their own right. The expectations with which I approached my inquiry into girls’ identifications with feminism were ones that were framed largely by personal experience with young adult women my own age, many of which distance themselves from even the semblance of feminist beliefs. Therefore, the most personally rewarding aspect of my project are my findings regarding the ways in which pre-teen girls advocate for structural change to rectify gender inequality and confidently embody alternative expressions of femininity.

If the cult of girlhood is an ideology assumed to pervade girls’ lives through culture, the extent to which girls resist its effects through creating their own unique personalities and

identities speaks to their abilities to exercise agency over culture. Almost all of the thirty-three girls I encountered have strong senses of self-confidence and exemplify a wide range of “identities,” including shy, sassy, outgoing, friendly, stand-offish, and boisterous. Their interests range from ice hockey and Legos to cheerleading, math, football, biology, and celebrities. Some girls wear bows and dress in pink, whereas others self-identify as “t-shirt and jeans” girls. Many just don’t care about types or labels, wearing clothes that are comfortable, warm, and make them feel good.

Costuming for Halloween was discussed earlier as a site in accordance with the cult of girlhood. Many of the girls’ costumes, however, were also means through which they expressed individual identity that deviated from norms. One girl dressed up as a “bodyguard” (to her friend “Lady Gaga”), and another posed as an “environmentalist,” because that’s what she “cares about” and because she “likes to be different.” In the same way, though some of the collages were indicative of an obsession with celebrities, many girls reject idolization of celebrities and give different explanations for why they chose to include certain images in their collages. For example, what follows is the collage of one girl who expresses distaste for

Justin Bieber. In it, she gives him facial hair, defacing the image.

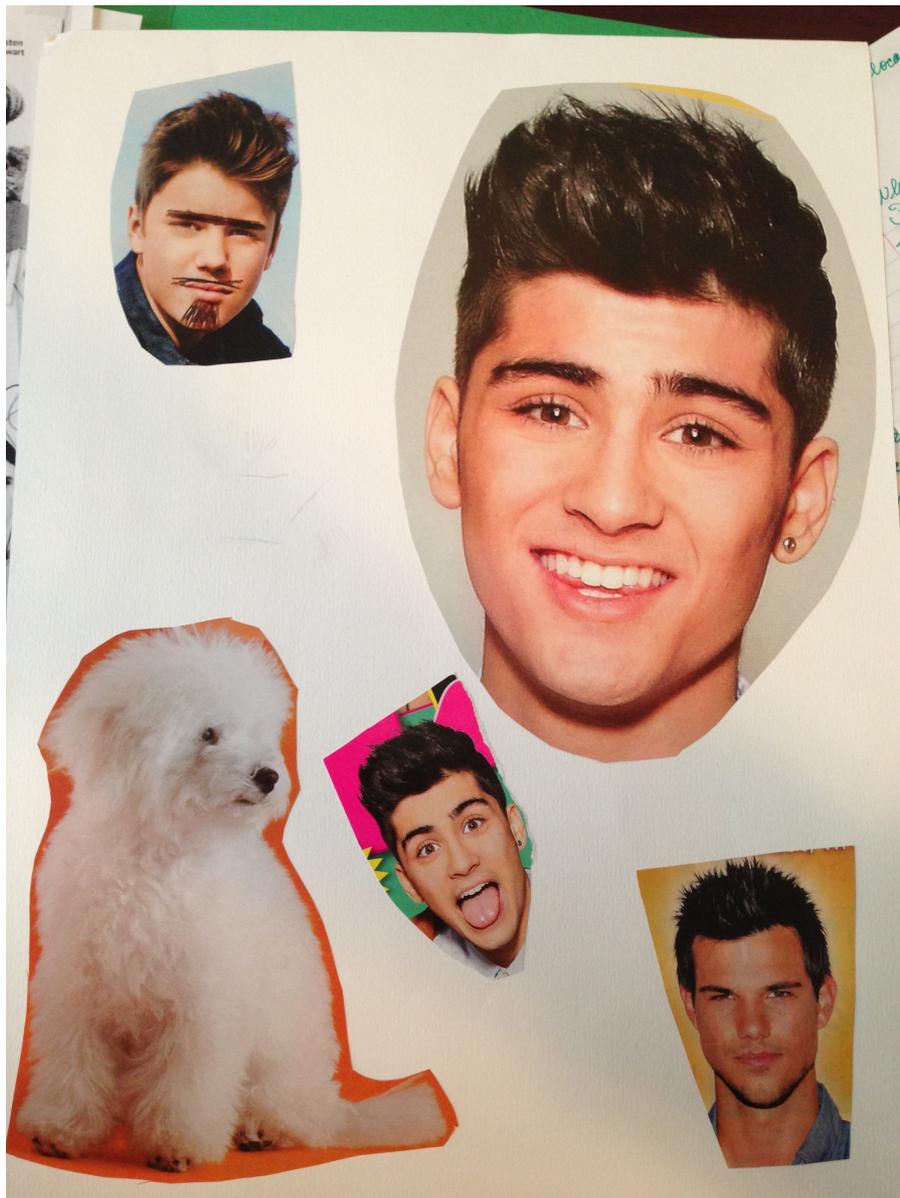


Figure 3: Bieber-Defaced Collage

To hear the girls' own interpretations of images, I turned to the explanations of their collages in their journals. This was when it was clear to me that "decoding" differed from "encoding." In one example, when a girl included a picture of a male celebrity, I, as a critical scholar, assumed a certain meaning relating to heterosexuality and the fairytale paradigm. The girl's explanation, on the other hand, explained that, "I chose a singer because I like people who sing," a statement that complicated my interpretation. Similarly, the choice of

one participant to include a picture of Edward and Bella (the romantic couple from *Twilight*) together in an intimate pose led me to similar conclusions about a focus on heterosexual relationships, whereas the girl's journal told me that she included the image because "I like all the excitement in the movie," again indicating the ways in which a critical reader's understanding can be mistaken. Furthermore, as part of the creation of their zines, I asked them to list three of their favorite things about being a girl. When one girl wrote "hair" and "nails," I assumed she meant it in the purely aesthetic way as indicated by many of the other girls. On the contrary, she later added in "Nails- to hurt brother" and "Hair- to whip people" that I understood her real intention that was not in accord with operating under the male gaze.

Another means of expressing identity that did not adhere to the cult of girlhood, particularly its focus on the fairy-tale paradigm, were girls' articulations of self-pleasing, career-oriented, and independent-minded future goals. The following are quotes taken from their various zines about what they envision their adult lives to be like:

Learn to surf, stay single, be a zookeeper, own 3 dogs, 1 cat, 1 turtle, and a hamster.

Stay single

Don't have kids!

Be a veterinarian so I can make a lot of money

I will go to college, don't drink wine don't do drugs don't smoke. Have a good job and make lots of money, have two or more kids.

Easy and simple life- So I don't want to buy a big house or have to [sic] many kids. I just want a simple life.

The causes of these statements in which girls reject marriage, motherhood, and domesticity can only be hypothesized about, but it is likely that they relate to neoliberal and individualistic ideologies. When one understands that her only means to success is through a series of personal life choices, it is not surprising that girls plan to streamline their future lives so that they can reach their full potentials and reap the greatest amount of benefits of

that success themselves, though this agenda inherently disregards the ways in which political, social, and economic realities are also at work.

These decided disavowals of the fairytale paradigm are further confirmed through one reader's choice to alter the magazine article quiz "Which Twilight Hottie Would Come to Your Rescue?" What follows is her version of the quiz.

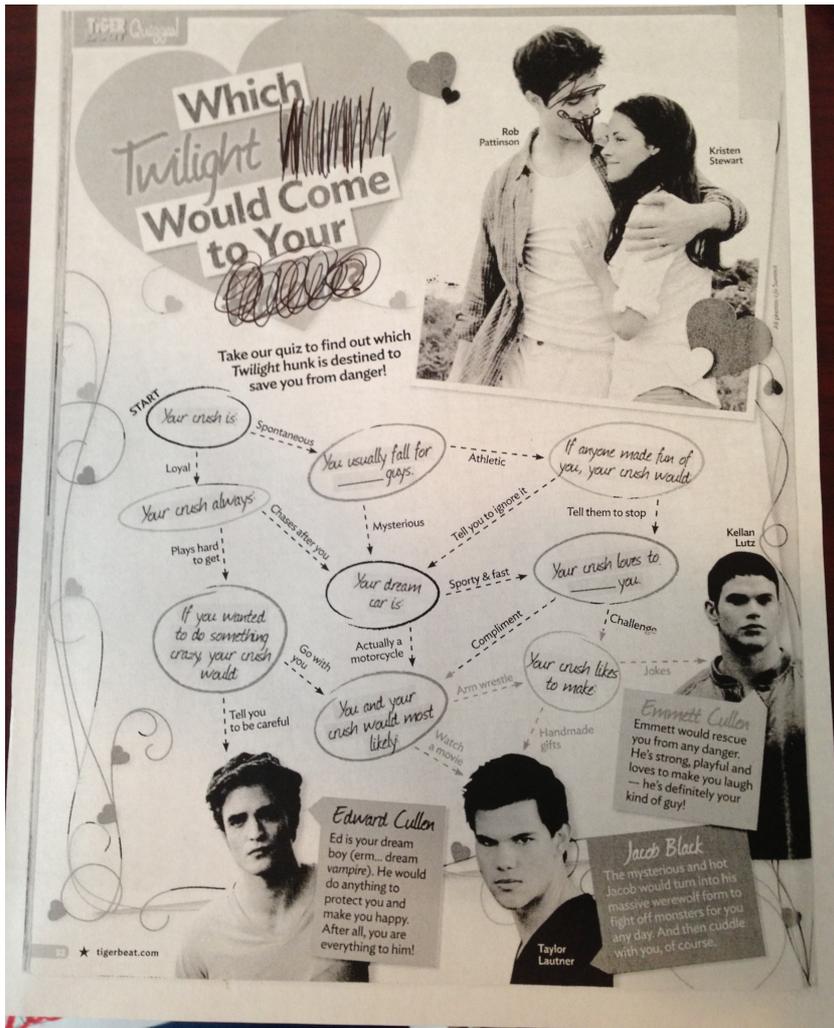


Figure 4: Twilight Quiz

The fact that the reader marks out the words "Hottie" and "Rescue" and writes on Edward's face so that he appears comical speaks to the fact that she does not take this quiz seriously, and therefore most likely does not take much stock in its recommendations towards her love life. In fact, in one SMART Girls session we did a critical analysis of this quiz in which I brought up its problematic aspects such as assuming that girls need rescued, that all girls have

crushes on boys, and that they should be seeking boyfriends. In our discussions, the girls showed distaste and discomfort with the quiz, making sound critiques such as the fact that the questions (i.e. “You dream car is...”) had no correlation to the “hottie” being selected.

In addition to personally embodying identities that challenge the cult of girlhood, some participants also articulate the need for structural change to combat gender inequity. In our discussion about bullying, male harassment, and domestic violence, the girls at Battell told me, “They should have a law that says boys shouldn’t be able to tell girls what to do.” By addressing the legal sphere as a site relevant to resolving girls’ problems, they are critiquing structure and calling for political change. When other girls countered with the claim that this would give females too much power, another girl articulated her conception of gender equality. She stated that it wouldn’t necessarily have to be boys tell girls what to do or girls tell boys what to do, but rather a society where there are equal rights and obligations: “If boys have to do this, then girls have to do that.”

My research groups also reveal understandings and issue critiques about the ways in which gender and its performance are results of social construction, a primary site found in the realm of sports. Girls relayed many experiences of being discriminated against in this manner, having been left out and ignored by peers, coaches, and entire programs. Sports in which they wished to participate include wrestling, hockey, baseball, and football, saying, “Everyone says they’re boy sports, but girls can do them too.” Additionally, of their own accord, the girls disassociated colors and styles with gender, speaking about how stores and brands play into what they think boys and girls prefer. They told me how different colors “are not necessarily a girl color- they might sell it in a girl’s store but it doesn’t mean anything.”

Also interesting is their discomfort with using phrases such as “You’re a girl” or “You throw like a girl” as derogatory statements. They say that “It’s not OK” to say these things, because it means that it is an insult to be a female. Given the degree to which many of

my own peers are desensitized by these kinds of statements, I was extremely impressed by the level of critiques and depth of thought my research participants employed. Lastly, their desire to connect with one another in these kinds of discussions is relevant to the notion of feminism as a collective struggle. One girl says, in the opening of her zine, “Dear Readers, I hope that you will read this and feel good. Even though this zine is about me and my life I think this could be an impact on your lives.”

What’s more, if twenty-first century feminism is conceptualized as a movement for inclusion and acceptance of the entire spectrum of gender identities and sexual orientations, then the girls make moves towards these ideas as well. One girl wrote a song that “is suppose [sic] to inspire people to stop bullying [sic]” called “We Are the Same”:

Why do people call you names?
Why do people treat you differently?
We are the same, we are the same,
No matter what they say
We are the same, we are the same,
In every humanly way, we are the same.

Furthermore, girls discuss the ways that different gender performances are received. Though some say they are teased for wearing “basketball shorts” rather than “jean shorts” during the summer, they say that boys who are more girly have it worse. “Some guys make fun of other guys- he got hit with a puck and called a girly girl...Boys get used to girls acting like boys, but people don’t get over boys acting like girls.” These statements are all hopeful signs for a future in which young feminists are the pioneers in a more tolerant and inclusive world.

Conclusion

As it stands, however, girls have little agency in cracking the powerful structures and institutions of society. Indeed, as Melissa A. Milkie shows in her article about magazine editor’s reactions to girls’ critiques of unrealistic portrayals of body image and beauty in their pages, external factors on which to place blame for perpetuation of the cult of girlhood will

always be at hand.²⁵ In many cases, the outside source of suppression is often truly to blame, though it remains unnamed. Indeed, other scholars have named this issue before:

The disciplinary power that inscribes femininity in the female body is everywhere and it is nowhere; the disciplinarian is everyone and yet no one in particular... The absence of a formal institutional structure and of authorities invested with the power to carry out institutional directives creates the impression that the production of femininity is entirely voluntary or natural.²⁶

In combating an elusive power structure that exhibits contradictory messages of empowerment and self-surveillance, of “being yourself” and buying things for self-improvement, of objectification of the female body and also of sexual propriety, and of autonomy adjacent to accordance with the male gaze, girls react in stridently resistant ways. Though textual analysis of girls’ magazines reveals the entrenchment of the cult of girlhood, sociological data proves that girls stand in many ways resistant to those norms by embodying alternative femininities and advocating for collective, politically active feminisms. The cult of girlhood, however, necessarily intertwines itself with feminist rhetoric and theory. Though girls’ feminist tenets yield optimism and excitement for the future, those beliefs are indeed fragile and susceptible to appropriation and distortion by postfeminist culture.

²⁵ Melissa A. Milkie, “Contested Images of Femininity: An Analysis of Cultural Gatekeepers’ Struggles with the “Real Girl” Critique,” *Gender & Society* 16.6 (2002): 839-859.

²⁶ Sandra Bartky, in Duke and Kreshel, “Negotiating Femininity,” 50.

Chapter Three: *@Power4Girl*

My response to the cult of girlhood and its entanglement in girls' lives is the creation of a zine, a personal self-published magazine containing original content with political intent. My feminist girl power zine, entitled *@Power4Girl* and found in Appendix D, builds on 1990s Riot Grrrl, third wave feminist zines through issuing a call to make the personal political once again, while also striving to take into account individual, minority experiences of femininity. Magazines create the cult of girlhood by using the ideologies of postfeminism and neoliberalism to normalize self-policing policies, the fairytale paradigm, suspicion of female relationships, and the white, heterosexual, middle class girl subject. My zine, however, counters these norms through encouraging girls not to be embarrassed, self-conscious, or prioritize boys' opinions and to join collectively with one another to talk about issues that matter. In this way, the zine I wrote and self-published serves as an activist voice through which girls can encounter further support for their articulations of resistance to the cult of girlhood.

The Zine's Purpose and Relevance

My zine, entitled *@Power4Girl*, aims to move forward from critiques of postfeminist culture and create a space in which girls can be exposed to and reclaim movements for structural change against sexist oppression. By riffing on current methods of teen girl magazines, it speaks to a crucial age group through articles and text that provide alternative messages of empowerment to those they may find elsewhere. Aiming to take back

“feminism” and “feminist” as positive terms and invite girls’ critical analyses of popular culture, @Power4Girl talks back to contemporary girl power magazines that are predicated on the cult of girlhood. The creation of @Power4Girl stems from a desire to subvert girl power culture and work for gender equality with girls face-to-face. Many sources critique postfeminism in the media, but few have turned those critiques into something accessible for the girls that those media messages affect. Returning to a mode of activism representative of original girl power in the zine, I hope to not only repurpose the form but also reclaim the message of radical feminism, distilling it into terms appropriate for girls ages nine to twelve.

This target audience is crucial, as studies such as those done by Myra and David Sadker reveal that during elementary school, “girls’ self-esteem, level of academic achievement, and future goals are strong.” As they grow to adolescence, however, this ambition and confidences has a marked decrease.¹ Therefore, I saw the need for early intervention that would plant the basic roots of feminist thought and critical thinking. Perhaps these ideas could come to fruition later in life when girls would ideally realize and understand the topics more deeply.

In this way, my zine also contributes to the development of readers’ critical thinking skills. Because the zine’s central work is to provide a critical approach to the way that mainstream magazines handle girl power, in doing so I invite the reader to recognize these methods and apply them in their consumption of other mainstream media. Duncombe discusses the ways in which zines were traditionally used by subcultures to “manufacture selves.”² In resisting hegemonic patriarchal definitions of femininity, zines were a means through which girls could put forth their experiences and conceptions of female identity, womanhood, and the problems that arose as a result of living in a patriarchal society.

¹ Zaslow, *Feminism, Inc.*, 16.

² Duncombe, *Zines*, 36.

Similarly, I intend for my zine to support girls as they come to understand their identities outside of the dominant force of the cult of girlhood.

@Power4Girl provides a critical voice and space for alternative ideas about girl power and girlhood in a number of ways. For one, the choice to integrate the zine with social media was made so that the zine does not have a clear beginning and end. The Twitter name indicated by the title is live, and at any time girls can tweet at the name to say what they think about the zine or about girl power. Although it is important to note that social media requires access to the internet, the form of my zine itself does not require internet to the extent that other activist media like blogs or YouTube do. Due to the fact that zines have traditionally been highly personalized, however, I felt it necessary to include a social media component so that it could potentially become part of a “personal is political” dialogue if the girls so choose.³ Indeed, the extreme personalization of zines and their disavowal of collectivity were what in many ways led to the “living of feminist lives” nature of 1990s-era third wave feminism. Therefore, though my zine is a personal creation, it does aim to use words and issue injunctions that invite the politicization of the personal as well.

Similar to the form of a traditional zine, *@Power4Girl* lies somewhere between “a personalized letter and a magazine.”⁴ It is reminiscent of tactics used in the Riot Grrrl zines in that it incorporates many of the same sections such as a “personalized editorial,” “opinionated essays or rants,” and “reprints from the mass press.”⁵ The zine’s signature informal look was appropriated by cutting and re-taping chunks of text and pictures onto new pages. Although each section centers on the same themes of challenging girl power culture, postfeminism, and neoliberalism, the topics covered throughout each section lend their own value to the zine as an activist work.

³ Duncombe, *Zines*, 28.

⁴ Duncombe, *Zines*, 10.

⁵ Duncombe, *Zines*, 10.

Content Analysis

Letter to Readers

The “Letter to Readers” introduces the topics I will discuss in the zine, both explicitly and implicitly. The letter names girl power and says openly that the zine will take a different approach than does mainstream media. Other more complex topics, however, like neoliberalism and making “the personal political,” are addressed obliquely. Neoliberalism is tackled by critiquing media in its attempts to solve the issue of body image through implying that girls should “choose” to have high self-esteem. The rhetoric of choice is problematic given that, as symptomatic of neoliberalism, it “refuse[s] to address how power works in and through subjects...It avoids all the important and difficult questions about the relationship between the psychic and the social or cultural.”⁶ Rather than addressing a society that normalizes unattainable female body types, neoliberalism and the rhetoric of choice place the burden on the female to both aspire to and trivialize an idealized appearance.

Bringing forth the concepts of “making the personal political” and consciousness-raising is done through the following statement: “What happens to you in your life...matters. More likely than not, it is happening to other girls too!”⁷ By calling for more discussion of the topics addressed, @Power4Girl acknowledges the fact that a single homogenized experience with regards to girl power or sexist oppression does not exist. This draws from traditional zines’ methods of not just “open[ing] up the personal realm to political analysis,” but creating “politics with a personalized analysis.”⁸ Though the zine puts forth hypothetical personal experiences, the possibilities for personalizing politics is endless.

⁶ Rosalind Gill, “Critical Respect: The Difficulties and Dilemmas of Agency and ‘Choice’ for Feminism, A Reply to Duits and van Zoonen,” *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 14.1 (2007): 76.

⁷ Olivia Lee, @Power4Girl (South Bend: self published, 2012), 2.

⁸ Duncombe, *Zines*, 28.

In the vein of creating “politics with a personalized analysis,” the Riot Grrrl movement and 1990s-era feminisms should not be viewed as a pristine and perfect moment of radical feminism by any means. As discussed earlier, in many ways these feminisms ignored issues regarding class, race, and white privilege by writing out the experiences of women of color. By consciously bringing forth race and class as central themes of my zine, I implicitly recognize this failure of the dominant second-wave and 1990s-era feminisms, creating a new space in *@Power4Girl* for dialogue about these topics.

Feminist FACT or FICTION!

The words “feminist” and “feminism,” however, should be retained and are relevant to both Riot Grrrl and *@Power4Girl*. The ways in which they reference a collective political struggle is significant, as using other terms could imply an arbitrary belief system or mere personal opinion rather than the social reality of gender inequality and sexist oppression. The section entitled “Feminist FACT or FICTION!” seeks to reclaim feminists and feminism as legitimate. Many scholars have charted the way in which the rise of postfeminism and girl power media culture has made feminism a dirty word. In this section, common misconceptions about feminism and feminists are addressed directly and subsequently debunked. Furthermore, this section addresses the “fantasies of female power” we see so prevalent in the media, explaining how these images are over-representative and problematic. Douglas names and describes this phenomenon, saying, “Now, the media illusion is that equality for girls and women is an accomplished fact when it isn’t.”⁹ She uses examples primarily situated in employment inequality, though these images of female power and dominance pervade all media, including magazines.

⁹ Douglas, *Enlightened Sexism*, 5.

Girl Power in the News

“Girl Power in the News” uses two articles about the Department of State as examples of news that is relevant for feminism and the status of women in America today. This section is contrary to the typical “news” sections in teen magazines that count celebrities’ love lives, new movies, and latest scandals as primary topics of interest. Furthermore, this section brings up the issue of motherhood and work-life balance, an area that is part of contemporary feminist societal critique. At the same time, the section does find subtle issues in the articles and names those as well. These critiques ask questions about society’s focus on money and the creation of wealth and interrogate the rhetoric of choice, building from McRobbie’s analysis of the way that the rhetoric of “choice” hides the fact that women still operate in a society that sustains structural inequalities and privileges male power.¹⁰

Dear @Power4Girl

“Dear @Power4Girl” is the longest and most in-depth section of the zine, posing hypothetical questions and problems girls may have about life in girl power media culture. This section addresses a wide range of issues, including gender discrimination in sports, domestic violence, celebrity culture, the commodification of race, colorblind racism, natural sexual difference, and a new focus on hyper-girliness. Specifically with regards to race, my zine adds to Sarah Banet-Weiser’s discussion of the ways in which race is seen as “a flexible, contradictory identity category that is presented in all its various manifestations as a kind of product one can try on.”¹¹ Through posing a hypothetical question and answer about the

¹⁰ Angela McRobbie, “Chapter 1: Notes of Postfeminism and Popular Culture: Bridget Jones and the New Gender Regime,” in *All About the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity*, ed. Anita Harris, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 9.

¹¹ Sarah Banet-Weiser, “Chapter 8: What’s Your Flava?: Race and Postfeminism in Media Culture,” in *Interrogating Post-feminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, eds. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 202.

vagueness of race in dolls, I intervene in this discourse and make its effects for young girls known.

Both the questions and answers are more involved than one would encounter in a typical girls' magazine, but the form itself is found in almost every magazine. In analyzing teen girl magazines, I found this "question and answer" section in need of reform. Usually, it conforms to neoliberal ideas of individualism, choice, and self-improvement, assumes that girls are consumed by their concerns about boys, and avoids tricky content like race, class, and sexism. I wanted to open this space up for a discussion of these and other sensitive topics while at the same time rejecting injunctions for girls to solve their problems alone through personal choice and self-improvement, advocating for resolution via other means. This, therefore, speaks to one of Joanne Baker's critique of postfeminism, where she explains how postfeminist and neoliberal ideologies contribute to the "demonizing of dependence, an illusory sense of autonomy, personal responsibility for avoiding vulnerability, and extensive self-surveillance."¹² By taking back a ways of understanding one's problems that does not see the individual as solely responsible for rectifying injustices done against her and therefore making space for coping methods apart from mere personal self-improvement, I hope to serve as an alternative, positive voice.

Feminist Stuff

"Feminist Stuff" is a section that parodies the (many) spaces in magazines in which an array of products are arranged in groups to either classify a girl in a particular category (i.e. "curvy," "glam," "girly," "tribal") or to provide an authoritative arena in which to claim the latest "must-have" products, among other purposes. These sections of magazines are particularly blatant spaces in which we see girl power and its commodification at work. The

¹² Joanne Baker, "Claiming Volition and Evading Victimhood: Post-Feminist Obligations for Young Women," *Feminism and Psychology* 20.2 (2010): 187.

implicit messages found in these sections is the claim that one can achieve power merely through the purchase of the goods displayed. Anita Harris discusses the idea of adopting a “feminist identity” via consumerism when she says that buying products that promote girl power is an “inauthentic” version of feminism. As a result, “girl power does not require an investment in social change,” but can merely be purchased or experienced through consumer products.¹³ This echoes Christine Griffin’s claim that girl power is equivalent to “the power of the girl as consumer” and thereby ignores inequalities in arenas such as professional status and the wage gap, political representation, and domestic violence and abuse.¹⁴ This section of *@Power4Girl*, however, satirically uses the same form of “consumer products” to advocate for feminist ideals like reclaiming the black female body and its features, silencing sexism, putting an end to gender stereotypes, critiquing unattainable and objectified representations of the female body, combating sexual violence, and advocating for social change.

Embarrassing Moments...NOT!

The last section, entitled “Embarrassing Moments...NOT!” also appropriates the form of a typical teen magazine in which girls write about their most embarrassing moments. Usually one of the final articles, the “embarrassing moments” section is the magazines’ parting message to readers, the final word that serves as one last message of self-policing. In mainstream magazines, the embarrassing moments section calls the reader to constant self-surveillance, implying that if not on constant watch, something could go wrong to upset the calculated maintenance of a feminine appearance. Usually this “disaster” involves a disruption of the girl’s performance of ideal femininity in the presence of peers or a male

¹³ Anita Harris in Zaslow, *Feminism, Inc.*, 6.

¹⁴ Christine Griffin, “Chapter 3: Good Girls, Bad Girls: Anglocentrism and Diversity in the Constitution of Contemporary Girlhood,” in *All About the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity*, ed. Anita Harris, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 35.

crush. This section entrenches femininity as submissive, subject to the critique of the male gaze, and something to be highly controlled and performed.

@Power4Girl's section about embarrassing moments turns this genre on its head. By narrating girls' hypothetical experiences that resulted not in embarrassment but in empowerment, *@Power4Girl* advocates for strong females that aren't ashamed to be themselves in the face of (usually male) critique. The fictional girls whose "stories" are told are not afraid to claim appearances, interests, or qualities that do not conform to the female identity expected of girl power media culture.

Process and Challenges

The process of creating *@Power4Girl* was an endeavor informed by scholarly secondary research and three sets of primary sources: teen magazines themselves, sociological research carried out at the Boys and Girls Clubs of South Bend, and attendance at a panel about zines at the 2012 National Women's Studies Association Conference. After obtaining information about feminist theory and the form of the zine as an activist and political space, learning the true ideas, concerns, questions, and interests of girls, and familiarizing myself with the content of mainstream girls' magazines, I felt prepared to take on the creation of the zine.

Utilizing the form, content, structure, and images of popular culture magazines was a conscious choice made with the intention to appropriate those facets of the magazine towards a different purpose. The challenge, then, was to translate these concepts into words appropriate for girls ages ten to thirteen while maintaining substantive content. Some radicalism and emotion, therefore, were foregone. This simplification of speech and shift in writing from an academic tone, however, was helpful as I sorted through what it was I actually wanted to say in the zine. By restricting my language to rhetoric that was simple,

clear, and intelligible to a fourth grader, I was forced to sift through concepts to determine what was most valuable, clarifying my message using the fewest and least-complicated words possible. My understanding of these topics has been deepened further through this process. What is most productive about the simplification of my language, however, is the fact that now girls can encounter feminist ideas and concepts at a level that they can understand.

Another challenge was the need to constantly monitor the zine's words, implicit messages, images, and tone. My worry was that employing a similar form and topics to popular culture magazines would further promote the ideas and images I was trying to avoid. My goal, however, was to juxtapose images found within mainstream magazines alongside text that critiques their role in those magazines and uses them in different ways and with different messages. This speaks to the notion that within popular media, resistance and acquiescence to post-feminist popular culture exist side-by-side, even within the images themselves.

Lastly, the physical assembling of the zine was a learning experience in itself. The means of putting it together and its appearance as a finished product (apart from its substantive content) says a lot about its politics. Characteristic of traditional zine-making, I did not try to make it look perfect or professional. Rather, the edges are rough, adhesive tape and the borders of paper can be seen, pages are cut off, margins are uneven, and text is not neatly spaced. The labor of cutting, taping, copying, and assembling the zine consumed a significant amount of time. This investment of time in creating the zine, accompanied by the knowledge that actual girls would be reading it, made the project feel truly activist. While holding the finished product in my hands, I feel both pride and excitement knowing that it carries my ideas about ways to achieve real girl power. Furthermore, the zine has a virtual component. In addition to the ability to participate through Twitter, I have also made the zine available for download over the internet. After receiving the zine in PDF format, one can

download it to apps like iBooks or Kindle. This diversity in form increases accessibility not typical of the exclusively paper format of traditional zines.

Conclusion

Creating a zine has required deep thought about how postfeminism, neoliberalism, post-racism, and girl power, although embedded in mainstream magazines, are not wholly untouchable ideologies of contemporary culture. Rather, they can be addressed and repudiated through alternative culture such as in the creation of zines. The activist project of becoming a zinester is valuable not only for my understanding of the topic, but also in that it provides a space for learning and critical analysis in the targeted age group of girl power media culture. Utilizing aspects of form found in both mainstream magazine and zines, *@Power4Girl* reclaims feminism and rejects the cult of girlhood by speaking directly to those that scholarly sources discuss as consumers of girl power media culture. *@Power4Girl*, therefore, is a crucial effort towards supporting and educating girls with regard to the importance of adopting feminism as a means to realize the promises of girl power.

Conclusion

Questions about the nature of the content of girls' magazines and the implications that content holds for American culture and society led me to look closely at nine different magazine titles. Through this inquiry, I concluded that the cult of girlhood is put forth, a framework that serves to normalize and reify certain aspects of American girlhood culture and identity. By means of the cult of girlhood, the habit of self-surveillance and self-policing in girls becomes an expected and unsurprising aspect of American culture. The ways in which this preoccupation with one's behavior feeds into the assumption that girls should shape their selves and identities in order to win the hearts of potential future husbands at the sake of other interests is a norm I name the fairytale paradigm. Due to the fact that the fairytale paradigm implies competition, the cult of girlhood also contributes to the belief that girls should, from the start, be suspicious of female friendships. Finally, the above three norms are completed with the fourth, which centers around the fact that the subject of postfeminist girl power media culture is not just any girl, but is presumed to be middle-class, heterosexual, and white.

As deeply as girls' magazines entrench the cult of girlhood in American culture, girls' lived experiences point to the possibility of resistant and negotiated understandings of cultural texts. This means that perhaps girls' local cultures and contexts such as schools, families, churches, and other communities hold more weight in determining girls' identities than do hegemonic cultural forces like the cult of girlhood through magazines. Ultimately, however, understanding and appreciating the nature, power, and inescapability of American media leads to the conclusion that, although in this particular case study the findings are

somewhat positive, further research into the nature of girlhood identity in America could render them unstable. As Angela McRobbie reflects on her mid-1970s cultural analyses, she begrudges the ways in which she ignored the dominance of “patriarchal power” and “heterosexual matrices” and therefore was too optimistic about the potential of her research audiences to exercise transgressive readings of hegemonic media.¹ In the same way, I reach cautious conclusions about the ability to find empowerment in postfeminist texts.

Although the girls articulated some evidence of the cult of girlhood, they were unafraid to move beyond the living of feminist lives individually and did indeed make a shift towards advocating for change on a social, political, and legal level. I cannot help but wonder, however, the extent to which this conclusion is but a result of their ages. Not yet out of elementary school, they may not have had exposure to the full force of American media that socializes and shapes ideas about gender and femininity so powerfully. Perhaps, therefore, girls’ disidentifications with the cult of girlhood and support for feminism speak to postfeminist culture’s power on an even greater scale. Namely, that this study of magazines and girls reveals optimistic conclusions only because at this stage in their lives, media has just begun its harnessing and manipulations of their hearts and minds. A study of the girls later in life, therefore, could yield drastically different findings.

¹ Angela McRobbie, “Young Women and Consumer Culture,” *Cultural Studies* 22.5 (2008): 535-538.

Appendices

Appendix A: Total Articles Analyzed

1. "What's Your Confidence Color?," *Bop!*
2. "The Power of You-th," *Girls' Life*
3. "Do you dare?," *Girls' Life*
4. "My dream class is...," *American Girl*
5. "Classroom confidential," *American Girl*
6. "Fearless," *American Girl*
7. "Dear Carol," *Girls' Life*
8. "Do You Commit...Or Quit?," *Girls' Life*
9. "Overcome Your Shyness," *Discovery Girls*
10. "Pressured to Grow Up Too Fast," *Discovery Girls*
11. "Lia Marie Johnson," *Glitter*
12. "Frame of Mind," *Girls' Life*
13. "What kind of fashionista are you?," *M*
14. "What I'm looking for in a girlfriend," *M*
15. "How Embarrassing!," *TWIST*
16. "Layering Dos and Don'ts," *TWIST*
17. "How Healthy Are You?," *Girls' Life*
18. "What He's Really Saying 2 U," *Girls' Life*
19. "Amazing Grace," *Girls' Life*
20. "Cool for School," *American Girl*
21. "OMG!," *Girls' Life*
22. "Body Image Survey," *Glitter*
23. "True Confessions," *TWIST*
24. "The Best Sweaters for Your Body," *TWIST*
25. "How will you Fall in love?" *Bop!*
26. "Beauty 101," *Glitter*
27. "Style Me," *Glitter*
28. "Ask An Expert," *Glitter*
29. "My 1D Dream Date," *Bop!*
30. "Which Twilight Hottie Would Come to Your Rescue?," *Tiger Beat*
31. "6 Reasons to Fall in Love with Blake!," *Tiger Beat*
32. "Do you follow your head or your heart?," *M*
33. "Playing Hard to Get," *Girls' Life*
34. "What 1D's Faces Reveal," *M*
35. "Unlock your crush's personality," *M*
36. "My first time ever...kissing!," *M*
37. "Who's your perfect 1D dance date?," *J-14*
38. "What do you friends love about you?," *J-14*
39. "Does your BFF have your back?," *Tiger Beat*
40. "What kind of friend are you?," *M*
41. "Which clique are you?," *Bop!*
42. "Do you know how to get your way?," *Girls' Life*

Appendix B:
Photographs from Notre Dame women's basketball field trip:
February 26, 2012



SMART Girls at Notre Dame vs. Syracuse 1



SMART Girls at Notre Dame vs. Syracuse 2



SMART Girls at Notre Dame vs. Syracuse 3



SMART Girls at Notre Dame vs. Syracuse 4



SMART Girls at Notre Dame vs. Syracuse 5

Appendix C: SMART Girls Schedule

October	Topic	Question	Activity	Output	Evaluation
Tues: 10/23 LaSalle Session 1	Introduction & SMART Girls Posterboard (day 1)	What does it mean to you be a SMART Girl?	1. Do introductions. 2. Make posterboard. 3. Give survey.	Getting to know the girls; expectations for the program Girls' goals	Notes from the day; the posterboard; surveys
Tues: 10/30 LaSalle Session 2	Posterboard (day 2); Setting Goals	What does it mean to be a SMART Girl? What are some goals I have for myself?	1. Finish board and journal 2. Set 3 goals: next week, end of the year, adulthood.		Notes from the day; journals
November Tues: 11/6 LaSalle Session 3	Gender discrimination; Structural influences	Are girls treated differently than boys? What do	1. Journal about gender discrimination; 2. Make a collage with	Discovery of girls' experiences with gender discrimination	Collages and journals

Th: 11/15 Battell	Introduction & SMART Girls Posterboard	magazines have to say? What does it mean to you be a SMART Girl?	images that interest you in magazines 1. Do introductions 2. Make posterboard 3. Hand out survey	(if any); intro. to media critique Getting to know the girls; expectations for the program	Notes from the day; the posterboard; surveys
Session 1					
T: 11/27 LaSalle	Engaging more with magazines; Twilight quiz	What do quizzes have to say?	1. Finish collages 2. Journal about collages 3. Take, critique, and discuss twilight quiz	Discovery of what they focus on in magazines and opinions about the quiz	Journals, collages, notes from our discussion
Session 4					
Th: 11/29 Battell	Media Literacy	What do magazines have to say?	1. Talk about magazines and their messages 2. Make collages	Discovery of what they focus on in magazines and what they know about media	Collages; comments during discussion
Session 3a					
December Tues: 12/4 LaSalle	Peer Relationships	How can I have a better relationship with other girls my own age?	1. Discussion 2. "Getting to know you" with a partner 3. Group discussion 4. Journal	Decrease cliques and bullying	Observations during activity; journals
Session 5					
Th: 12/6 Battell	Gender discrimination	Are boys treated differently than girls?	1. Finish collages 2. Journal 3. Take, critique, and discuss twilight quiz	Discovery of what they focus on in magazines and what they think about quizzes	Journals, collages, notes from our discussion
Session 3b					
January Wed: 1/23 LaSalle	Zines (day 1) and Advice	What is a zine? What questions (about anything) do you have for me?	1. Explain zines. 2. Pass out and read my zine. 3. Start zines. 4. Take their questions.	Their understanding of the nature of zines. Knowledge about their lives and issues (via advice	Notes from the day, initial work on their zines, their questions on Word doc.
Session 6					

Mon: 1/28 Battell	Zines (day 1) and Advice	What is a zine? What questions (about anything) do you have for me?	1. Explain zines. 2. Pass out and read my zine. 3. Start zines. 4. Take their questions.	questions). Their understanding of the nature of zines. Knowledge about their lives and issues (via advice questions).	Notes from the day, initial work on their zines, their questions on Word doc.
Session 6					
February					
Mon: 2/4 LaSalle	Zines (day 2)	What do girls put in their zines and how does it relate to girl power?	1. Continue work on zines.	Knowledge about what girls put in their zines.	Their zines.
Session 7					
Mon: 2/11 Battell	Zines (day 2) and Magazine Interviews	What do you think of magazines?	1. Continue work on zines. 2. Interview girls individually about magazines.	Knowledge about girls' opinions about girl power, zines, and magazines.	Their zines and interview responses.
Session 7					
Wed: 2/20 LaSalle	Zines (day 3) and Magazine Interviews	What do you think of magazines?	1. Finish zines. 2. Interview girls individually about magazines.	Knowledge about girls' opinions about girl power, zines, and magazines.	Their zines and interview responses.
Session 8					
Mon: 2/25 Battell	Zines (day 3)	What do girls put in their zines?	Finish zines.	Knowledge about girls' opinions about girl power and zines.	Their zines
Session 8					

Appendix D: @Power4Girl Zine
(see next page)

@Power4Girl

A zine for those who want to
know what



REAL girl power is!



Olivia L

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1

Dear ALL those interested in learning about REAL girl power,

You have probably heard the phrase "girl power" before. Maybe you thought, "I'm a girl, and I want some power!" Or, "I know some girls, and they deserve equal power!" Well in this zine, we'll try to figure out what girl power actually means. A "zine" is like a magazine, but instead of relying on lots of money from advertisements so they can be printed and appear in the checkout line of every grocery store in America, zines are written and published by anyone! Your typical magazines try to tell you what girl power is. They say that it's buying a t-shirt with a certain slogan, selecting the "right" clothes for your body, or "just choosing" to have high self-esteem despite all the airbrushed celebrities you see in the media around you. We don't think this is real girl power- do you? Contribute to the conversation by tweeting @Power4Girl with your thoughts and opinions!

This is important! What happens to you in your life, whether it's one time or every day, matters. More likely than not, it is happening to other girls too! Having conversations about what is wrong, talking about why it is happening, and making our voices heard is a great way to create change for REAL girl power. After you're done with this zine, pass it on to a friend, get on social media and talk about what you learned, have a conversation with your neighbor, or make your own zine and start the process all over again. Let's go get power for the girls.

Yours,

@Power4Girl

②

EXCLUSIVE



Feminist FACT or FICTION!

Revealing the truths about feminism, one statement at a time!

Today, girls and boys are treated the same- everyone is equal!

FICTION!

- Girls are still raised to think they should look like Barbie and are expected to regulate every aspect of their self, both physical and emotional.
- Girls are encouraged to be the ones to please boys in a relationship and meet his "ideal girl"- not the other way around.
- After receiving an education, women are much more likely than men to sacrifice a career, lots of money, and independence to stay home and raise a family. Working at home is so important, even though it's unpaid, so why aren't men expected to make sacrifices and contribute to work at home too?

I believe that men and women should have equal rights, but I'm no feminist!

FICTION!

- You are probably a feminist- and that's not a bad thing!
- The media often portrays feminism as something that is crazy and unnecessary. They do this by creating feminist characters whom they show in an unflattering way.
- Just because you aren't like the "feminists" you see on TV or hear people talking about doesn't mean you're not a feminist.

Showing our emotions is normal, whether you're a boy or a girl! Calling someone "a girl" or "a sissy" because they are sensitive, emotional, shy, or going through a hard time is NOT OK.

FACT!

- This statement is true! Using those kinds of words to put someone down not only probably hurts their feelings, it is also disrespectful to ALL women and girls.
- By trying to make someone feel inferior by calling them names that mean they're a "girl," you are adding fuel to the fire of all those people who really do think that boys are better than girls. Telling someone they are acting like a "girl" should be a compliment, not an insult!
- Being a girl is an important part of who you are as a person. Don't you want the idea of "being a girl" to be a positive one, not a negative one?

From Kim Possible to Beyoncé and Angelina Jolie to Katie Couric- I see many examples of powerful women all the time. These cases obviously prove that feminism did its job.

FICTION!

- *These examples are by far not representative of what life actually looks like for many women. Most women don't have the money or the time to go around saving the world on TV or in real life.*
- *The media employs these examples of high-powered women to gain viewers, but in real life women still get the short end of the stick.*
- *This can be proven when we think about the actual percentages of women in positions of high power- like the fact that only 6% of the CEOs of the top 100 businesses are women!*
- *Also, it's important to think about the fact that all these examples of "powerful" women still fall into what men consider attractive. This seems to be a requirement for a position of power, although it shouldn't be!*

The media has negative effects for girls' body images- what we see affects how we feel about ourselves.

FACT!

- *Part of the culture in which we live is that girls are expected to make sure that they look, dress, and behave in certain ways. Things like magazines, TV, and movies tell girls they should always make sure they are wearing the "right" clothes for their body, exercising a crazy amount, constantly dieting, and making sure everything from their hair to their makeup to their underarms looks perfect all the time.*
- *When one reads a fashion magazine or watches a movie, it is near impossible not to compare one's own appearance to the airbrushed and unattainable bodies of celebrities.*
- *This has serious consequences- many girls develop eating disorders, disordered eating, or lack of self-confidence due to these unrealistic standards.*

¹ <http://www.forbes.com/sites/lesliebradshaw/2011/08/04/why-women-having-a-seat-at-the-table-is-not-enough/>

Girl Power in the News

Current events that matter for people who care about girl power!

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE PROMOTES WOMEN-FRIENDLY BUSINESSES

November 16, 2012- Washington, D.C.

The U.S. Department of State is a part of the government that deals with international issues and is our country's voice to other nations. On November 16th they hosted a conference where more than 100 leaders from big businesses, governments, and not-for-profits gathered to discuss the most effective ways that businesses can "invest in" women. The title of the conference was "Investing in Women to Maximize Returns" and had panels like "Corporate Citizenship: Women—The Optimal Investment."

What does this mean, "investing in women?" Basically, it means spending money to make sure that businesses are "woman-friendly." This could mean lots of things, from creating daycare centers so mothers don't have to leave their paid job, to coming up with business plans that help women make more money and become more independent.

It is a huge step for females that these powerful people are recognizing that the paid workplace is still very unequal between men and women. Having meaningful discussions about the barriers that still exist for women as they try to achieve a fulfilling career is a very positive thing indeed.

One thing that could be better about the panel, however, is how our country focuses so much on money as success! What if the panel was called "Supporting Women: They Deserve Equal Opportunities"? I doubt as many people would have participated in the conference. Also, it seems like progress for women in business won't happen unless businesses know for sure that they won't be losing any money. So basically, though it uses new words, it is

the same thought about how can businesses make more money? I am worried that this talk about how to include more women in business is only a trend that is being used to help businesses make more money, not to actually help women succeed.

HILLARY CLINTON TALKS ABOUT WORK-LIFE BALANCE

October 25, 2012- Washington, D.C.

As part of the "National Work-Life and Family Month Event," Hillary Rodham Clinton, our country's Secretary of State, talked to her employees in the Department of State about work-life balance. Although the speech focused on women, Clinton said, "...this is an issue that is not a woman's issue. It is a human issue, and a family issue." The topic of "work-life" balance is very important, because often working parents (usually mothers) face a lot of pressure both from their paid workplaces and their homes to be perfect in all aspect of their lives. Many girls, maybe even yourself, are already worried about how they are going to do it all when they grow up and become adults.

Clinton talked about her own experiences being a working mother and the ways that she has tried to change laws that make it hard for people to both raise children and have a career. Her speech makes it clear that we need more strong female leaders in our country. If this happened, there would be much more freedom to talk about tough topics like this.

(6)

Exclusive



A part of her speech that is not all the way correct, however, is when she says, "What is so great about especially being a woman in the United States of America in the 21st century is that you have so many more choices and decisions that you can make that are right for you, whether anyone else would make the same choice." Since Clinton is talking to her staff, she is talking to people with enough money to have freedom to choose. However, not everyone in America is so lucky. It is important to think about how many women can't make the "choice that is right for them," because maybe a good education wasn't available to them, or maybe they don't make enough money, were abused by their boyfriend or husband, or live in a dangerous part of town.

What is really positive is that Clinton talks about how women should not be expected to balance work and family on their own. She says that government support for things like daycare and flexible work schedules is absolutely key. It is also really great that Clinton talks about how we shouldn't bad mouth people who choose different ways to parent, such as to be a stay-at-home mom or a mom who works outside the home too. A lot of time media tries to make us think that women are always going against each other, but Clinton makes a point to say that we should be more tolerant of others' decisions. The fact that Clinton talks about these concerns and that the government could be doing more to help is exciting. The fact that Clinton is a very powerful woman and could actually help make these changes a reality is even more exciting!

Dear @Power4Girl

A space where girls can ask questions and get real answers about how to attain confidence, control, and power in their own lives.

Dear @Power4Girl,

I've been having problems with boys at recess. Whenever we pick teams to play soccer, I am picked last. I used to always be one of the first picked because I am one of the fastest kids in my grade. Lately, though, I have heard the boys talking about how they don't want to pick girls for their teams. One of them even told me last week that I should just go play hopscotch and jump rope with the other girls. Can you help me??

-@Soccerlvr9



HELP!

Dear @Soccerlvr9,

What a pain! Doesn't it make you angry that sometimes boys think girls aren't as good at what they do just because they're girls? It's not your fault that you are being targeted because they are insecure! Soccer is a sport that is played by both men and women, and being male does not automatically make them better at it.

Try to take control of the situation by becoming a picker yourself! If someone challenges you, ask them what they're so afraid of. Put together the best team you can, including both girls and boys. If the game is a fair match, you have done what you could to prove your point!



If that fails, that doesn't mean you can't play. Why not get a group of girls together and start your own game? Insist they give you space on the playground to have a game too. If they don't, challenge them to a game for "dibs" on the playground. (Hint- You achieved your goal right there!)

You should know that these boys are bullying you. Don't let them win with their intimidation! You can try the above suggestions, but it is important to know that it is not your responsibility to create equality on the playground. If the bullying doesn't stop or gets worse, you can talk to a trusted teacher or another adult in private about the situation. My hope is that you will be supported in your efforts!

Yours,

@Power4Girl



Dear @Power4Girl,

I am really bothered by what I see in the news lately. My favorite singer and absolute idol is the pop artist Rihanna. I was heartbroken when I found out that her boyfriend Chris Brown had physically abused her three years ago. Why I am worried now is because I have seen all over the news, twitter, and facebook that she is getting back together with him! Why is she making such horrible choices? Please help me figure out what to think about this situation!

-@LOveROfRihanna

Dear @LOveROfRihanna,

This is a very difficult situation. It is very sad, but Rihanna's case is not unusual. Today in America, 25% of women (or 1 woman out of 4) will at some time in their lives be a victim of violence at the hands of someone that they are romantically involved with.² This is a very scary statistic. In general, it is best to wait for dating until much later in life, when you more about yourself and what you want in life. Take this time to become your own person and explore your own personality and talents!

Rihanna is in a tough spot here. I think more important questions we could ask would be: Why did Chris Brown get away with what he did to Rihanna without being punished more? Or, Why does domestic violence and abuse often repeat itself? We shouldn't forget that Rihanna is a victim. No matter how much wealth, fame, or power she has, it is so sad that even she could not escape this tragedy. Regardless of if Rihanna and Chris Brown are back together, we shouldn't put the blame on Rihanna now.

even
MORE HELP!

Why don't we start conversation about why domestic violence, particularly sexual violence, is so often ignored in America? Why has Chris Brown continued to be so successful even though he committed a horrible crime? What can we change about our country so that the normal woman who is physically abused doesn't also depend on her abuser for the necessities of life like food for herself and her children and a roof over her head? Although this isn't the case with Rihanna, changing how we think about domestic violence in America could have affected Chris Brown's ability to still be popular after the scandal. What America thought about Chris Brown, therefore, might have had an affect on whether or not Rihanna saw him as an appealing partner again.

Keep listening to Rihanna's music if you like it. Also, though, think about how a lot of hip-hop and pop music makes it natural to think that men should be more powerful than women. Ask your friends what they think. Come together and write your own lyrics to a song that expresses your feelings about the situation and about violence towards women in America today. Hopefully you'll feel a lot better.

Yours,

10

@Power4Girl

Dear @Power4Girl,

In a lot of the dolls I see today, there are usually non-white dolls included. I think this is good, because I am a Latina and like to see more dolls like me. Lately, though, I have been a little confused. Even though the dolls are not white, it seems like that's all they are- not white. Why aren't there any Latina dolls that I can relate to?

-@LATinA2?



Dear @LATinA2,

Today in America we pretend that we are "blind" to different races. Apart from being absolutely ridiculous, it is also very confusing to a lot of people. Differences between races still exist, and usually this means that people who are considered white are more powerful, because a lot of them have had access to better education, had supportive and stable homes, and had parents with better-paying jobs with benefits like healthcare. This definitely doesn't mean that ALL people of color don't have as many opportunities as white people, or that just because someone is white they are better off than you. Certainly not. But our country has a history of putting people down who are not white, and it's important to think about how that history still affects us today.

Since today America likes to think that everyone is equal, it is sometimes tricky to represent minorities in their real situations and personalities. Instead, we get Bratz dolls that wear certain types of clothes or makeup, and those things are supposed to represent their race. This is our country's way of saying that race is just about what you buy and not about things like laws that are still prejudiced against minorities.

Do you know about the law called "Arizona SB 1070?" It's a law saying that in Arizona, a police officer can ask someone for proof of citizenship just based off of how they look. It is supposed to prevent Mexican immigrants from coming into the country illegally. Don't you think it's ridiculous that Mexican-Americans or other Latinas like you could be suspected by a police officer just because of the way you look?

So, to answer your question: Toy makers only make dolls that show their race (apart from their skin color) through clothes, accessories, or hairstyles 1) because sometimes that's the only way when you only have a doll to work with, and 2) because they don't want to get into about other "touchy" issues like the fact that minorities, on average, do not make as much money or have the same education levels as white people. If they did take these things into account, it would mean that maybe our government should do more for the poor and disadvantaged, and that is something many people like to ignore. I hope this helped clear it up!

Yours,

@Power4Girl



Dear @Power4Girl,

Can you resolve an argument between my best guy friend and I? He keeps telling me that boys are naturally better leaders than girls, that they are more ambitious and more logical just because they are boys. Is this true? Please help me prove him wrong!

-@NatrIGrrl



Dear @NatrIGrrl,

That is most definitely not true! Thinking that males are more natural "problem-solvers," "logical thinkers," or leaders is a myth and rumor that has recently become more popular. Of course, males and females do have differences between them, but they are biological- having to do with the human body.

Many things that some people assume are natural are things that have actually been learned over time since the moment we are born. People treat children differently according to if they are a boy or a girl, and most of the time we don't even think about how the ways we are treated affects our many choices, like what we like or don't like, what we think we are good or bad at, and how we present ourselves in public.

I encourage you to talk about these things with your friend, and anyone else who has the same beliefs as him. Your actions to try to change how people think is called activism. By doing this, you will prove yourself as an ambitious leader! You have proven him wrong already!

Yours,

@Power4Girl

Dear @Power4Girl,

Today, I finally saw a movie that a lot of my friends have been telling me to watch- *Legally Blonde*! It was pretty funny and it made me laugh a lot, but after it was over I had a funny feeling in my stomach. You see, I don't have blonde hair, I HATE the color pink, and the thought of getting my nails done makes me want to fall asleep. The thing is, I want to be a successful lawyer too. Do I have to look and act like Elle to have girl power?

-@Law2moro



← Elle Woods! :)

Dear @Law2moro,

No, definitely not! *Legally Blonde* shows a woman who becomes a powerful lawyer, but she looks the same as every other celebrity on TV, doesn't she? Elle Woods in *Legally Blonde* is part of our culture today that tries to tell you that what girls really want is to be able to act super girly again- wear pink feather boas and high heels, daydream about boys, and have a miniature dog. I don't think that's what all girls really want, and I am glad that you agree with me!

Real girl power is about loving your own mind and body just the way it is. This means that if you do look like Elle Woods and love her fashion choices, be happy and confident in that! But, like you, if others don't, that doesn't make you any less capable of achieving girl power. Girl power is recognizing that girls deserve no less than boys. Girl power means trying to get what we deserve by speaking up when we see something that's not fair and helping other girls out to do the same. It's not fair that most of the versions of girl power we see on TV connect girl power with being super-girly! You are perfect proof that this isn't true. ☺

Yours,

@Power4Girl

Feminist Stuff

Some things you could really use to get girl power!

PROBLEM? NOT ANYMORE!



HAIR FRIZZER
Is your hair naturally stick straight? Buy this amazing hair frizzer, and stand as one with other girls who don't want to conform to what the media is telling them to look like. Support those who have been made to feel as if their natural hair is "inappropriate" or not good enough- Get your hair wild and untamed with the wonderful hair frizzer!



SILENCE SEXISM APP

Do you get frustrated by hearing boys say things to each other like, "You throw like a girl!", "Stop complaining- you're such a sissy!", or even worse, "You can't do ___ - that's only for boys!"?? Get the "Silence Sexism" Application for your smartphone today- available for Iphone or Android! (Also available for non-smart phones).

DECODER BRACELET

Are you sick of people looking at you and assuming things based on what you look like? YOU know that just because you have blonde hair doesn't mean you can't do math, and that wearing Converse doesn't mean you hate ballet. Help others realize this too, by wearing this special patented bracelet. By snapping it on, your appearance is automatically separated from what society says someone that looks like you should be like. Experience true freedom and equal treatment- try the Decoder Bracelet today!



DE-PHOTOSHOP SPECS

Ever wondered what it would be like to read a magazine BEFORE the editors did all the photo-shopping? Well, your days of dreaming are over! The newly patented "de-photoshop specs" are glasses that do just that! Put them on and experience a whole new world of beautiful wrinkles, uneven natural skin tone, and even cellulite dimples! Discover for yourself that celebrities are real people too!



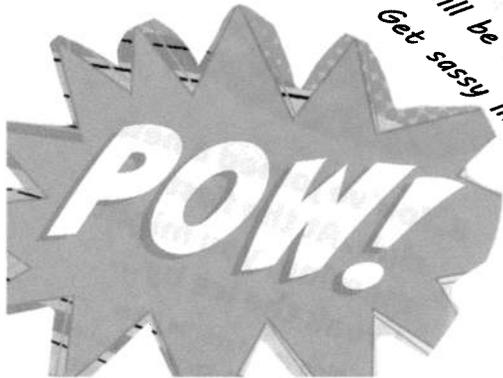
SUPERCOAT

Have you ever envied Spiderman, and the way he kicks butt once he puts on his spider suit? You can do the same as soon as you buy one of our one-of-a-kind Supercoats! Pre-programmed with the skills of an Olympic gymnast and black belt karate master, the strength of a weight-lifting champion, and the reflexes of a cat, all you need to walk alone at night is the Supercoat. Don't fear anyone lurking in the shadows who might try to hurt you or take advantage of you- your Supercoat will get you out of that trouble in no time! Also comes with a built in camera to snap a picture of your assaulter- send it directly to your local sheriff over wifi with built in GPS location information!



SASSY SWEATER

Don't you wish you could talk back to people who say offensive things about women and girls? Are many of those people more powerful than you, and would it have many negative effects for you if you actually called them out for their rude comments? Worry about this problem no longer! All you need to tackle this problem is the sassy sweater. When you wear it, you can say anything you want! Your superiors will be understanding, sympathetic, and change their behavior right away. Get sassy in our sassy sweater!



Embarrassing Moments...NOT!

This year, I was interested to see what would happen at Thanksgiving dinner when I would be sporting my new short haircut. After several years of wearing it long, I was so sick of spending countless hours drying and styling it. It's so much easier for sports, too. When the day finally came and I walked in the doorway, I heard a couple gasps and saw my cousins whispering behind their hands. My grandma shrieked, "Oh my! You look like a boy! What happened to your hair?" *I was SO embarrassed...NOT!* I am so happy I cut my hair. It makes me happy and I love the way I look- who cares what others think!

Lately, I have started to see some changes in my body. I think I'm going through what I've heard people call "puberty." This means that there is now hair places there wasn't before and that my breasts are sometimes sore. I also am starting to get some pimples on my face. Today at school a boy behind me in line for the water fountain said, "Hey, why aren't you wearing a bra yet?" *I was SO embarrassed...NOT!* I am the one in control of my body, and no one should be able to tell me how I should dress it or make it look! Who does he think he is for trying to tell me what to do?!

Last weekend, my family went to the local ice rink. I saw some boys playing hockey, and it looked like a lot of fun. Today in the lunch line, I was talking to my friends about how I thought it would be cool if girls could join the hockey team. The boys behind us in line started laughing, saying, "Why should we include you? Hockey is for boys!" *I was SO embarrassed...NOT!* I don't care what other people say, I think all sports should be available for girls too. It was that boy who should be embarrassed for his mean comment, not me!

Since I was born, I haven't been able to hear as well as others. Because of this, sometimes I talk differently than most people. Earlier this year, I started at a new school where I didn't know anyone. On the first day my teacher introduced me to the class and I said hello. Immediately, half of the class erupted in laughter because of the way I sounded. *I was SO embarrassed...NOT!* Although their laughter hurt me, I refuse to let anyone make me feel embarrassed about a part of myself that makes me unique. Soon, I found true friends who don't try to make others feel bad about themselves. Go me!

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